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'I don't know what I'd change. I think I'm quite fine

exploring the experiences and views of boys with autism about their primary school playtimes.

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*‘I don’t know what I’d change. I think
I’m quite fine’: exploring the
experiences and views of boys with
autism about their primary school
playtimes.*

Peter Dunning

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Abstract

The following study explored the playtime experiences of boys with autism while attending mainstream primary school settings.

The literature related to the topic of playtime experiences for boys with autism is scarce, with many studies considering playtime as an additional aspect of children's primary school experience. The literature which exists on this topic has identified that some children with autism experience social challenges at playtime related to their social interaction difficulties, and to peers hurting, teasing or calling them names. Literature on this topic has tended to focus on the challenges children with autism face at playtime, with less known about their interests, preferences, strengths, and what they perceive might help them.

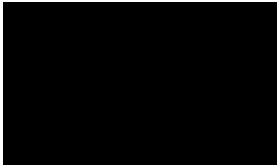
Thematic analysis was conducted on both observational and child interview data. The study focused on two areas, which were the experiences and views of boys with autism about their playtimes and how their views might inform supporting them.

The themes which were developed included: the function playtime can serve; the challenges playtime can bring and factors which support a good playtime experience.

This study supports previous research which has suggested some boys with autism experience challenges with peers at playtime, yet has also indicated a range of other potential challenges, a range strengths and successes, the possible function playtime can serve some children and the factors which can support children to do well. By including the views of boys with autism about their playtime experiences, school professionals might make more effective support plans for them. Educational psychologists are well placed to support schools to include the views of children when developing playtime support plans for boys with autism.

Declaration

I declare that the work carried out in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

Signed:  . Date:...29/08/19.....

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Abbreviations

Autism Spectrum Condition = ASC

Autism Spectrum Disorder = ASD

Autism Education Trust = AET

Special Education Needs and Disability Code of Practice = CoP

Department for Education = DfE

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis = IPA

Moderate to vigorous physical activity = MVPA

National Autistic Society = NAS

Special Educational Needs = SEN

The International Classification of Disease = ICD

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders = DSM

Theory of Mind = ToM

United Kingdom = UK

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child = UNCRC

United States of America = USA

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1. Introduction

1.1. Chapter Overview

In this chapter I will introduce the topic of this study; what led me towards this particular topic; explore the concept of autism and terminology; consider its prevalence and key policy related to supporting children in schools and finally discuss what is understood about playtime within mainstream primary schools in the UK. I will first outline the focus of the study.

1.2. Focus of the Current Study

In the following study, I aimed to explore the experiences and views of boys diagnosed with autism, about their primary school playtimes. This was a small-scale study with six participants, and I employed a qualitative methodology with thematic analysis. I chose to both observe participants at playtime and conduct semi-structured interviews with them. I aimed in the study to promote the voice of my participants, gain insight into their experiences at playtime and their views of this time of the school day.

The views and experiences of each participant differed greatly. I nonetheless hope that it is this variation which gives the study strength in indicating the breadth of potential experiences boys diagnosed with autism may have at playtime. The study also provided a more strengths-based account of participant's playtime experiences than some previous studies on this topic. It was the views expressed by participants that formed the basis of my Findings and Discussion chapters, and I consider how those views might inform good practice in the Conclusion chapter; using both the potential challenges some participants faced, but also the potential for playtime to be experienced positively.

1.3. Personal and professional experiences that led to the current study

Choosing the topic of my doctoral thesis was far from straightforward, and I took a considerable amount of time deliberating over what the final study would look like. A range of factors led me towards the present study, the first of which being my prior experiences of working as an Early Years Practitioner within a pre-school. For three years in this role, play was an integral part of my work with children and I used play to support their cognitive,

social, and emotional development. My experience in this role showed me that play was an integral part of being a child and child development. I believe that children's social and emotional development is just as important as their academic progress if they are to become successful and well-adjusted adults.

Once I began my new role as a trainee educational psychologist, I was struck by how much less emphasis school professionals placed on the potential for play to be a valuable experience for children. Many of the teachers I worked with seemed largely unaware of playtime and were clearly under pressure to move children on in key areas such as literacy and numeracy. When I think back to my own primary school experiences however, it is not the classroom that stands out in my mind, but the experiences I had at playtime. Despite there appearing to be more emphasis on children's academic development in some schools, it appeared to me that playtime experiences remained important to the children. I therefore wanted to carry out a piece of research in line with these values.

My final decision to focus on the playtime experiences of boys diagnosed with autism came during a piece of casework I carried out during my Year Two placement. This involved a boy diagnosed with autism who was experiencing difficulties with peers at playtime. He had reported that peers were refusing to play with him and that he found this the most difficult time of the school day. I reflected on the joy I had felt during my own playtimes at primary school, and the relief I felt at being able to leave the classroom and be outside. I pondered what the primary school experience might be like for a child who found playtime the most challenging aspect of their day.

While on the Doctoral program for Educational Psychology at the University of Bristol I have learnt about the importance of the social context of school, as well as the unique role of educational psychologists in facilitating the views of children and young people. I became determined to shed further light on the experiences of boys diagnosed with autism, from their own perspective, about their playtimes. This led me towards a qualitative exploration of the topic that was focused on promoting the views of children.

I will now explore the concept of autism, various models of disability, as well as practices for diagnosing autism in children.

1.4. Autism Spectrum Conditions

1.4.1. Overview

Autism is a lifelong, developmental disability that affects how an individual communicates with and relates to others, as well as how they perceive and experience the world around them (National Autistic Society (NAS), 2018). Kenny et al (2016) highlighted the contention and strong disparity of views when considering the language used to define and describe autism. 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' (ASD) and 'Autism Spectrum Condition' (ASC) are currently the most frequently used terms when describing autism, and both refer to the same set of traits and behaviours associated with autism (NAS, 2018).

The term ASD is currently the predominantly accepted term used within the medical literature, and this provides a clinical category to label children who present with particular traits or behaviours (NAS, 2018). The term ASC however, has gained increasing favour recently due to concerns that the use of the term 'disorder' may infer a disparaging concept of autism (Baron-Cohen, 2017; Runswick-Cole, 2014; O'Neil, 2008). In order to present how I will define and describe autism, I will first explore the medical diagnosis of autism, behaviours associated with the diagnosis, and how it is understood from a medical perspective. I will then consider any issues with this viewpoint. This will allow for a consideration of other ways of looking at autism, such as through the Neurodiversity perspective. I will discuss the prevalence of autism and any trends associated with its diagnosis in children before finally describing current policy regarding children diagnosed with autism.

1.4.2. The medical perspective and diagnosis of Autism

In the UK, the International Classification of Diseases Tenth Edition (ICD 10, 2015) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (DSM 5, 2013) are both currently used as diagnostic manuals in the classification of autism. The lists of behaviours and traits associated with autism within each of the manuals are extensive, but broadly cover repetitive or restricted patterns of behaviour or interests, as well as difficulties with language, social communication and social interaction. Behaviours commonly associated with the diagnosis at all ages are: an underdeveloped understanding of emotions and social reciprocity, stereotyped motor movements or use of objects (such as lining up objects), and difficulties with developing social and communication skills (DSM 5, 2013; ICD 10, 2015). Difficulties with social interaction, imaginative and socially reciprocal play, understanding

feelings and the views of others, and inflexibility in thinking are commonly seen in the behaviour of children who receive the diagnosis (NAS, 2018).

While both manuals used in the classification of autism share many traits associated with the diagnosis generally, the subdivisions within each manual differ significantly from the other, as well as from their own previous editions. While changes within the manuals might be interpreted as a process of refining our understanding of autism, the classification of autism has been criticised on the basis that changes may imply a socio-cultural influence on the diagnosis. This will now be considered.

There have been significant changes to the criteria and categorisation of autism in the DSM 5 (2013) since the previous manual; with all previous diagnoses (such as 'Autistic Disorder', 'Asperger's Disorder', and 'Atypical Autism' or 'Pervasive Developmental Disorder') now being combined under the umbrella term 'Autism Spectrum Disorder'. 'Asperger's Disorder' in particular has historically been used to describe and diagnose those who present with behaviours associated with autism, but whom are somewhat more socially adept; otherwise described as those with 'high functioning autism' (Jaarsma and Welin, 2012). Those with a diagnosis of Asperger's Disorder were considered to have a higher Intelligence Quotient, develop speech to a typical level, and sometimes present with strengths associated with their diagnosis, along with particular difficulties (Baron-Cohen, 2017). Yet changes in the DSM 5 (2013) now place Asperger's Disorder on one end of a continuum of disorder, with those presenting with more severe autism at the other end of the spectrum. Meanwhile, the ICD 10 (2015) continues to define Asperger's Disorder as a distinct condition, with a separate diagnostic criteria.

It is perhaps not surprising that a diagnosis dependant on observable behaviours is subject to socio-cultural influence and thereby varies over time. Crucially though, this suggests that the diagnosis itself may be influenced by social constructs of both what constitutes autism, as well as by the current socio-cultural parameters for typical or 'normal' behaviours (Jaarsma and Welin, 2012). The potential for sociocultural influence in the conceptualisation of disorders has led many critical disability theorists to carefully scrutinise the medical model of disability (Kapp, 2011; McKenzie, 2013; O'Neil, 2008; Thomas, 2004). Controversy over the existence and later removal of 'homosexuality' as a medical disorder within the DSM 3 (1980), is one particular example which is frequently referenced with regard to the social construction of disorder within the manual (Jaarsma and Welin, 2012). In order to define autism in a way that does not limit its conceptualisation to a purely medical perspective, I will consider another emergent explanation; the Neurodiversity perspective. Since the

Neurodiversity perspective is strongly influenced by the social model of disability this will first be explained (Woods, 2017).

1.4.3. Models of disability and Neurodiversity perspective

The social model of disability holds that impairments in one's body or mental functioning are not necessarily flaws, but become a disability for an individual when society fails to adjust to those differences in human functioning (Gable, 2014; Williams et al, 2015). The social model differs from a medical understanding of disability in that the impairment itself is not seen as the problem (Llewellyn and Hogan, 2000). Rather, the onus is to improve the way those with impairments are treated and included within society, making impairment and the experience of disability two distinct entities (Gable, 2014; Williams et al, 2015).

Mckenzie (2013) highlighted that the social model may place too much emphasis on environmental components of disability however, and suggested through this, disability could be nothing but the consequence of social structures. The author outlined an 'interactional' model of disability, where a person's individual experiences of impairment, their autonomy, and the environment all interact to create disability.

The Neurodiversity perspective of autism provides a somewhat similar concept that disability is created through a society which fails to (practically or socially) accommodate for people (Woods, 2017). Yet with the Neurodiversity perspective some of the traits associated with autism are not necessarily viewed as impairments, but rather might be seen as neurological differences (Runswick-Cole, 2014). The Neurodiversity movement (which emerged during the 1990's and was led by many people themselves diagnosed with autism) therefore presented a shift in thinking towards a conceptualisation of autism as a unique neurological state of being, with alternative ways of socialising, communicating, and sensing the world (Baron-Cohen, 2017; Jaarsma and Welin, 2012; Runswick-Cole, 2014). The disabling impact of the failures of modern society to understand, accept, and accommodate for those with autism was crucial to the Neurodiversity perspective (Kapp, 2011; Jaarsma and Welin, 2012; O'Neil, 2008).

The Neurodiversity perspective (like the social model), highlights the importance of language to shape meaning and rejects the medical language used to describe autism, since this ignores the potential for societal influence on the experience of disability (Runswick-Cole, 2014). While the medical model for explaining autism remains the dominantly accepted narrative, the assumption that autism should be considered a 'disorder' is questioned in the

Neurodiversity perspective, and the position that autism might better be understood as a kind of neurological 'difference' is proposed (Runswick-Cole, 2014, O'Neil, 2008).

Having explored a range of models for disability, and how to construct the nature of disability, I will now explore the language used to describe autism and the impact this can have on how it is understood.

1.4.4. Language used to describe autism

Baron- Cohen (2009) suggested that the use of the term Autism Spectrum Condition rather than Autism Spectrum Disorder allowed for a description of autism which avoided the disparaging term 'disorder'. Therefore, in an attempt to provide a more holistic understanding of autism than purely a medical disorder, I will employ the phrase ASC throughout. I will be referring however to the same set of behaviours and traits associated with a diagnosis of ASD. Whilst making no claim that these present a medical disorder, I do not deny the existence of difficulties or vulnerabilities associated with such differences.

A final consideration when describing ASC is that of whether to describe individuals using person-first language (person with autism) or disability-first language (autistic person) (Kenny et al, 2016). This is an important consideration, since each approach may be seen as relating to particular models of disability, and has particular connotations as to how disability is constructed (Dunn and Andrews, 2015).

The use of person-first language is common in the United States of America (USA), which is intended to emphasise people over disability, as well as to avoid essentialist language which implies all individuals with the same impairment have the same experiences (Dunn and Andrews, 2015). As Dunn and Andrews (2015) stated:

[...] where people are viewed primarily in terms of their disabilities- disability becomes the essential aspect of their identities, at least in the eyes of observers, so that their personalities, abilities, interests, and other personal qualities are subordinated by a condition that is perceived to be a dominant trait (Dunn and Andrews, 2015 p. 259).

This approach fits with the social model of disability outlined above (Dunn and Andrews, 2015). Yet the use of disability-first language (E.g. autistic person) has been advocated by some groups, particularly by disability study researchers, who maintain that person-first language denotes negative connotations to an impairment, and also argue that a person's

impairment is an inextricable part of their identity (Andrews et al, 2013). Disability-first language is more commonly used within the UK, and has been associated with a 'minority' or 'diversity' model of disability, which seeks to remove connotations of disability as deviance from the norm; seeing disability rather as a form of diversity which individuals may take pride in (Dunn and Andrews, 2015).

When considering the views of those with particular impairments concerning language, some variations exist. For instance, Rottenstein (2014) surveyed individuals with a range of different conditions and found that the majority of individuals preferred the use of person-first language. However, respondents were not unanimous in this. This study was also based in the USA where person-first language is more common. A UK study, by Kenny et al (2016) found that 61% of adults with a diagnosis of autism preferred the term 'autistic person' over 28% preferring 'person with autism'. This finding was based on 502 adults with autism, whom did not all agree on the terms which they preferred. As such, there are no universally agreed ways to describe individuals.

Dunn and Andrews (2015) suggested that one solution might be to simply ask each individual how they wish to be described. However, this presented problems in the present study, since I could not assume that participants would all agree, which would make writing about their experiences difficult. Another issue with this approach was that not all of my participants were aware of their diagnosis, which meant I was unable to ask them their preferences regarding language without disclosing their diagnosis to them. I therefore chose not to ask participants their preferences regarding language.

I chose to use person-first language, as this represents the diversity of experiences participants appeared to have. I will use the terms 'child with autism', and 'boy/girl with autism' throughout. I am aware that some individuals with autism would not advocate for this term, that this approach is less common in the UK, and that some disability theorists may have concerns about the potential to construct autism as a negative property which individuals are afflicted with. My use of person-first language here is not intended to denote a negative connotation to autism, or to suggest that autism may not influence a person's identity. Nor do I propose by using this language that person-first language is the right approach in every case. I intend by using person-first language to highlight the potential for boys with autism to have varied playtime experiences, and to honour the quote by Dunn and Andrews (2015) about the range of skills and interests which made each participant unique. I would also suggest that using either person and disability first language may remain true to the neurodiversity perspective, but I am aware that person-first language is based more in the social model of disability than the minority model (Dunn and Andrews, 2015). (For further

reflections on how I came to this decision see 'Reflections on my personal and professional development' in the Conclusion chapter).

In order to provide a greater context for what follows, I will now present the current prevalence rates of ASC within the UK, and consider how and why changes in prevalence rates over time may have occurred.

1.4.5. Prevalence

A range of diagnostic tools are currently used within the UK to diagnose ASC in children, including the Ages and Stages Questionnaires, the Communication and Symbolic Behaviour Scales, and The Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule, to name a few. Diagnosis can be given to infants as young as 18 months (although this is rare), however the average age of diagnosis is believed to be around 5 years of age (NAS, 2018). Gaining a universally agreed prevalence rate¹ of ASC is difficult due to differences between the criteria in each diagnostic manual, population samples in studies, and the varying methodological approaches in each diagnostic tool (Baron-Cohen et al, 2009). Adult prevalence rates are difficult to ascertain since some adults may not be accessing services where data can be collected, and low response rates typical with studies aiming to gain this information by other means (Brugha et al, 2012).

The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2018) stated that ASC is the third most commonly diagnosed developmental disability among adults in the United States. In the UK, ASC increased in prevalence throughout the late 20th century. Brugha et al (2012) indicated that prevalence rates for adults were around 1.1% of the population in 2007.

Considering school aged children, figures appear more easy to come by due to each school's existing special educational needs register, with prevalence rates appearing to be just over one percent of the child population between 2004-2010 (Baron-Cohen et al, 2009; Taylor et al, 2013). Taylor et al (2013) suggested that yearly incidence rates² (as well as prevalence rates) appeared to have plateaued between 2004-2010. Recent figures about prevalence rates which include England are hard to come by, yet the Department of Health (2019) estimated further increases in the prevalence of autism in children in Northern

¹ The proportion of the population with a diagnosis

² The number of new diagnosed cases within a given time (often yearly)

Ireland: going from 1.2% to 3.3% between 2008/09 and 2018/19, with a ratio of 4:1 between boys and girls.

In the UK, Taylor et al (2013) found prevalence rates in relation to gender indicated 3.8/1000 boys were diagnosed, compared with 0.8/1000 girls. Gould and Ashton-Smith (2011) have highlighted that differences in prevalence and incidence rates between boys and girls should be interpreted with caution however, since less is known about how autism may present in girls than in boys. The authors have suggested that ASC in girls may go undiagnosed, and that current figures may therefore be an unreliable measure of the extent of autism in the child population.

A universally agreed explanation for the apparent increase in ASC diagnoses is widely debated (Baron-Cohen et al, 2009; Matson and Kozlowski, 2011; Zablotsky et al, 2017). A controversial study suggested figures related to diagnosis of autism represented a true increase in ASC due to a causal link between autism and the MMR vaccine (Flaherty, 2011). However, the findings of this study were discovered to have been falsified, and there remains no significant evidence for environmental factors which cause autism (Flaherty, 2011). Some evidence exists for genetic factors associated with an autism diagnosis, such as parental age at birth, yet evidence that this is related to the increase in diagnosis is difficult to predict due to numerous variables, including: changes in diagnostic criteria (in particular a broader diagnostic categorisation); increased public awareness of autism and support of children with the diagnosis (leading to increased parental motivation in seeking diagnosis); as well as variances in research methods used to explore prevalence rates (Baron-Cohen et al, 2009; Matson and Kozlowski, 2011; Zablotsky et al, 2017). There is also some evidence of a comparable decrease in the number of children diagnosed with other developmental disorders alongside the increasing prevalence of an autism diagnosis, possibly suggesting diagnostic substitution (Zablotsky et al, 2017). There remains ongoing controversy around any claim of diagnosis substitution however, since prevalence rates of ASC alone vary from study to study (Baron-Cohen et al, 2017).

1.4.6. Policy

Over the past several decades UK policy and government legislation has led to an increased focus on inclusive education (Salamanca World Statement UNESCO, 1994; Equality Act 2010; Special Education Needs and Disability Code of Practice (CoP), 2014; 2015). What this means is that mainstream schools are increasingly expected to include children with autism within their ways of working, and to make reasonable adjustments in order to ensure

all children reach their potential within this environment (Equality Act, 2010). The Equality Act (2010) set out the legal obligations of schools, early years settings, post 16 providers and local authorities have in relation to those with special educational needs (SEN) (including those diagnosed with autism). The CoP (2015) document drew on this significantly; stating that schools must be pre-emptive of the needs of particular children to ensure SEN children are not at a disadvantage and that they do not experience discrimination. This included the provision of auxiliary aids and services, as well as support for all children to access the curriculum and physical environment.

The Autism Education Trust (AET) published the Autism Standards (2016) document to enable schools to develop their practices and support the inclusion of children with autism. Particular factors drawn out in the document are the increased use of visuals within schools, additional support for children in understanding and engaging in social interactions, the importance of staff training on autism, and a consideration of the sensory experiences of children with autism both indoors and outside. A key point made within the document is the importance of consulting with children with autism about their needs in relation to free time (both indoors, and outside on the school playground) and to provide suitable support for structured play and peer interactions (AET, 2016).

I will now present a brief history of the use of playtime in the UK, as well as current trends in how playtime is used and understood, and the present situation regarding governmental policy.

1.5. Primary school playtimes

1.5.1. Historical roots

Schools in the UK typically have an outdoor area of some kind in which children spend some time of their school day. The existence of the school playground dates back as early as the nineteenth century, where Robert Owen advocated for an outdoor space attached to schools (Thomson, 2005). Samuel Wilderspin is also responsible in part for the development of the use of an outdoor space in schools, which was at the time intended to provide opportunities to teach children discipline, and educate them in the morally appropriate behaviours of the time (McCann and Young, 1982). Throughout the twentieth century the outdoor space was seen as more about the opportunity for children to play, to develop socially and emotionally, and to improve health (Thomson, 2005). Trends in how playtime was managed were likely

influenced by changing understandings of the use and benefits of playtime. I will therefore now outline key theoretical understandings of playtime.

1.5.2. Theoretical understandings

Considering play more generally, Piaget (1962) originally highlighted the potential for play to be an important aspect of children's development, and that through play children developed important cognitive skills. The potential benefits of playtime in children's development has therefore received some attention as well, and I will focus on theoretical understandings about playtime here, since to focus on theories of play would be to suggest that playtime *only* involves play.

The work of Peter Blatchford (1989; 1994), and Anthony Pellegrini (1993; 2001) stand out as key proponents of theory related to playtime in schools. Pellegrini and Davies (1993) as cited in Towers (1997) outlined that the traditional 'surplus energy theory' in which children require time outdoors to let off steam, lacked a physiological basis. Instead Pellegrini and Davies (1993) suggested a possible relationship between children's social skills at playtime, and their academic skills in the classroom; arguing that this correlation could mean that social and cognitive skills were developed during playtime, which were important for other aspects of academic life. Smith, in Blatchford and Sharp (1994) outlined that social skills necessarily for adult life, such as initiating interactions, managing conflicts, and collaborating with others could all be seen partly developing on the school playground. Meanwhile Factor (2004) and Blatchford and Pellegrini (2002) have suggested that having a break from formal learning for a short period, can also support children's focus in class.

Blatchford and Sharp (1994) suggested that playtime could be made sense of in two ways. The romantic view (which emphasised the enjoyment playtime brought children, and viewed it as providing important learning opportunities), and the problematic view (which emphasised problems such as gender inequalities, bullying and disruption all related to playtime).

Another way to understand playtime came from Sluckin (1981), who posed that at playtime, children's play and social activities could be seen as preparing them for their lives as adults. More recently however, Brown, in Moyles (1994), argued that playtime behaviours could be understood as having purpose in their own right for children, separate from preparing children for adulthood and having a more immediate purpose. Nonetheless, the author suggested that playtime was a highly social time, in which children developed social skills.

Opie (1993) maintained that playtime was a unique context in children's lives, where they were able to share knowledge of games and play routines unknown to adults, which the author named 'children's lore' or 'children's culture' (Opie, 1993, p. vii-ix). Blatchford and Sharp (1994) also pointed out the importance of the reduced level of adult governance over this context, with the authors indicating that the school playground remained the main site in which 'children's culture' could be engaged with by children.

Despite the various ways in which playtime may be understood, there appears to be some indication that playtime can provide children with a unique opportunity to interact with peers, and develop social and cognitive skills, which can have a positive impact on their school day. (Towers, 1997). Nonetheless, playtime has been cited as a key time where behaviour management can cause concern for adults (Blatchford and Sharp, 1994). Given the potential problems as well as benefits playtime may bring, an important consideration is what policy exists on playtime provision within the UK. This will now be outlined.

1.5.3. Policy related to playtime

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) outlined 'the right of the child to engage in play' (UN, 1989). The advocacy group, Play England (2013) has since placed pressure on the government to respond to this agenda. However, governmental policy which guides educators in the use of playtime is scarce, and governmental guidance which mentions playtime provision is primarily focused on behaviour management (DfE, 2016). In a recent study Baines and Blatchford (2019) found that the length of break times has been steadily reducing over the last few decades due to increasing pressure on school standards. The authors also illustrated that research has consistently indicated the potential benefits of playtime for children, and that with rising mental health concerns among the child population, the lack of policy related to break time provision and how this may support students to develop social and emotionally is perhaps surprising.

Guidance on supporting those with special needs at playtime is also scarce, but often comes from individual agencies concerned with particular conditions, such as the Autism Standards (2016) mentioned above. Therefore, the importance of playtime may have been increasingly overlooked by governmental guidance. Nonetheless, playtime has received some attention in research (Crust et al, 2014; Factor, 2004; Newman et al, 2006; Mahony et al, 2017). I will now consider how autism might impact on children during playtime, before exploring the research literature on playtime experiences for children with autism in the Literature Review chapter.

1.6. Autism and playtime

Given the potential difficulties associated with a diagnosis of autism, it is possible that playtime may present children with a number of challenges. I will now provide a summary of the potential challenges playtime could pose children with autism. This will include, where possible, reference to the research literature. However, a comprehensive exploration of the literature related to autism and playtime will follow in the Literature Review chapter.

Autism is associated with a range of potential difficulties, including difficulties with social interactions, different sensory experiences, restricted interests and repetitive play, the tendency to be solitary or have reduced interests in social interaction, difficulties in developing language or understanding more complex and nuanced language, and copying behaviours without a full awareness of the social meaning of those behaviours (DSM 5, 2013; Lantz, 2001).

Playtime may be seen as a social time of the school day in which children are able to socially interact, talk to one another, and play together in a self-directed way (Jarvis, 2007). Given this, and the named difficulties some children with autism experience, it is possible that playtime presents children with autism with a number of unique challenges. These will now be explored in turn.

1.6.1. Social interactions and social understanding

Research has suggested that children with autism struggle with social interactions at playtime (Kasari et al, 2011; Locke et al, 2016). In particular, children with autism have been suggested to find spontaneously initiating interactions with peers challenging, and may find responding to others attempts to interact with them challenging as well (Kasari et al, 2011; Locke et al, 2016). Despite this, Locke et al (2016) suggested that some children with autism show good social interaction skills, and appear to manage well at playtime.

A common difficulty associated with autism is the delayed or halted development of a 'Theory of Mind' (ToM). ToM involves the ability to understand the mental states of others, how their perspectives may differ from ones own, and how they may feel. This develops at around age four in most children, yet the trajectory of its development in children with autism is often less linear. Given this, it is possible that children with autism will have trouble making sense of social situations at playtime, and predicting how other might behave.

1.6.2. Sensory experiences

The NAS (2018) described sensory differences as varied ways in which some children experience and process sensory information. This was outlined as either under-sensitive (hypo) or over-sensitive (hyper), and included the five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, but also body awareness (proprioception) and balance (vestibular) (NAS, 2018).

These differences may well be brought to the fore while children with autism enter the school playground, given that many playgrounds are large, exposed, and often can be crowded at playtime (Jarvis, 2007).

1.6.3. Solitary play

Given that some children with autism have less interest in social interactions with others, and can in fact find social interactions both challenging and anxiety provoking (Lantz, 2001), it is likely that the playground may be a challenging experience for some children with autism. As such, the extent to which a child with autism is socially included, or whether they play alone is likely to be a key aspect of their playtime experience. Children with autism may well face unique challenges in being socially included in the primary school playground (Lantz, 2001).

1.6.4. Restricted interests and repetitive play

Since some children with autism can be solitary in their play at playtime, it is important to consider why that might be. One possible reason for this could be related to having restricted interests and repetitive play patterns (Wolfberg, 1995). Lantz (2001) suggested that children with autism tend to view the world as more literal and concrete, making their access to the wider range of open-ended play scripts with other children at playtime limited. Children with autism may also be reluctant to explore new areas of the playground, or lack interest in the range of activities available (Sanrattana et al, 2013).

1.6.5. Language

Given the potential difficulties with developing language and social communication which some children with autism present with (DSM- 5, 2013), and extend to which language and social communication forms the basis of much of what occurs during playtime (Jarvis, 2007), it is also likely that playtime can be difficult to access for some children with autism.

Sanrattana et al (2013) suggested that due to difficulties with language and social communication, some children with autism struggle to engage with their peers at playtime, which can have detrimental impacts on their peer relationships in school.

1.6.6. Copying others play and behaviours

Finally, the tendency for some children with autism to lack social understanding can lead those individuals to attempt to mirror the behaviours of their peers in an attempt to 'fit in' (Lantz, 2001). At playtime, this may lead to copying behaviours which are inappropriate, whereby children with autism may be reprimanded for behaving inappropriately, while having not fully understood the social meaning of their actions (Mathews et al, 2013). It is also possible that copying behaviours may be disconcerting for other children at playtime, leaving children with autism open to retaliation from peers for this behaviour.

In sum, based on current understandings of autism, and difficulties associated with the diagnosis, I have indicated a range of possible issues playtime may present children with autism. I will now provide a more comprehensive exploration of what exists within the research literature about children with autism at playtime.

2. Literature Review Chapter

2.1. Chapter Overview

As mentioned in the Introduction Chapter, the aim of this study is to explore the playtime experiences of boys with autism while attending mainstream primary school settings. The purpose of this chapter is to review previous literature relevant to this topic, which is presented in three sections. The first section concerns the themes present in the existing literature related to playtime experiences for children with autism. Section two summarises the key findings of the literature review, and considers what remains unclear within the literature to date. The final section outlines the current studies aims and research questions. Firstly, I will present the search strategy I used to review the literature.

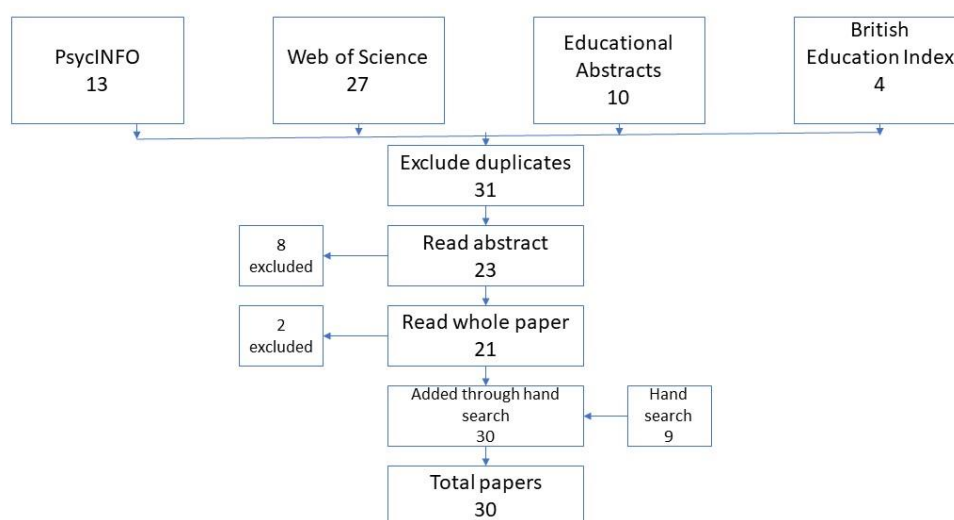
2.2. Literature search strategy

Several databases were used as the primary basis by which to identify relevant literature. These were: Psych Info, Web of Science, Educational Abstracts, and British Education Index. I also used Google Scholar and the reference lists of studies identified in the literature review; these generated additional literature gained through hand searching.

Central to my inclusion criteria within the search was to remain as focused as possible. Inclusion criteria focused on literature which explored mainstream primary school playtime only; it did not include literature on specialist school playtime environments, those concerning secondary schools, or those solely focusing on Reception classes. This was because I aimed to explore the experiences of children with autism within mainstream primary schools in particular. Since Reception classes include play as a core part of the curriculum, and tend to play separately to the rest of the school, I chose to exclude Reception aged children, focusing on years one to six. Studies which included participants diagnosed with AS and/or ASC were all included. This was because diagnostic practices have varied across time and vary across county's, meaning a child with one diagnosis might equally have been assigned the other diagnosis. Thus, similarities may well exist in the experiences of both groups of children. Studies which explored the impact of a given intervention were not included. This was because the intervention study literature is vast, and is not focused on experiences at playtime, but rather the experiences of a particular invention. Studies included in the search dated back no further than 2003, however one earlier study (Oches et al, 2001) was included since this added something different to much

of the other literature on this topic³. Only studies that were written in English were included, this included both UK and USA studies. I was aware that UK and USA playtime experiences may differ, yet due to the scarcity of literature on this topic, I chose to include both. I have reflected on where a study is based in the USA and how this may influence the interpretation of findings. See Appendix 10 for details of my search strategy. Figure 1 (below) presents a summary of the literature review process.

Figure 1: Summary of literature review process.



I used the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2013) to inform a critical appraisal of the literature; considering high quality research, as well as its relevance to playtime experiences for children with autism. I deemed 17 of the included papers to be of high quality; being rigorous in design, acknowledging weaknesses and providing detailed explanations of the analysis undertaken. The remaining studies appeared to show some flaws either with their methodological approach the conclusions drawn from evidence provided or with the level of detail provided about analysis. After duplicates from various databases were excluded, I read the abstracts of individual articles. This indicated a further eight studies which were not relevant to the study (four were related to interventions, two

³ Oches et al (2001) approached their data collection differently to many other studies within the literature on this topic; conducting observations which were ethnographic rather than based on time-based observation checklists. Their findings are also unique to other studies on this topic and I therefore deemed the study worth discussing.

were about special schools, and a further two were not about playtime, but instead focused on experiences at school in general). Following this I read whole papers of all 23 identified studies. This highlighted a further two studies which were not relevant (one was related to special schools rather than mainstream schools, and the other was an intervention study). Once 21 studies had been identified as relevant to the literature review, I chose to search within the reference lists of all relevant papers. This yielded a further seven studies which met all of the above criteria, and a further two were found using Google Scholar, with 30 studies identified in total. I will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of particular studies in what follows.

2.3. Section one: themes related to playtime experiences for children with autism

This section presents the various themes which I identified from the research literature concerning playtime for children with autism in mainstream primary schools. The focus in this section is what playtime experiences children with autism have, and what views they have about those experiences. Some problems emerged when considering the research literature on playtime experiences for children with autism. For instance, much of the existing literature comes from health-related research which has employed quantitative methods and provides only some indications as to the views of children with autism about their playtime experiences. There also appeared to be a focus on the difficulties children with autism experienced at playtime, with positive experiences, and evidence of what may help support positive experiences somewhat lacking. When considering the potential difficulties playtime may present children in the Introduction chapter, it is also apparent that many of these areas appear absent from the research literature presently. Nonetheless, I was able to find a range of key areas which the literature signified are important when seeking to understand the playtime experiences of children with autism. I organised the existing literature based on its content, into the follow six areas:

- Social experiences and preferences
- Play interests
- Physical activity levels
- Gender differences
- Age differences
- Sensory experiences

I will now explore the literature in relation to these six areas, before considering what may remain unclear.

2.3.1. Social experiences and preferences

Much of the research literature concerning children with autism during playtime focuses on their social interactions with peers (Locke et al, 2016). More specifically, there is a focus within the literature on how they experience challenges in peer interactions during playtime (Locke et al, 2016). These challenges will now be considered, alongside the potential for children with autism to have more positive experiences during their playtime interactions. I have presented this section in four subsections, which outline: time children with autism spend playing with others or alone; preferences for playing with others or alone; social interaction difficulties; and finally, the experiences of children with autism when playing with others.

I will begin by outlining the evidence related to how much time children with autism appear to spend playing with other children at playtime, before considering their preferences about playing with or without other children.

2.3.1.1. Time spent playing with others

The research literature suggested that children with autism spend less time interacting with peers at playtime than children without autism (Kasari et al, 2011; Locke et al, 2016). There is not yet consensus about how much time children with autism spend engaged with peers at playtime, but some studies have used timed interval observation in order to explore this, as well as to consider the possible reasons behind this discrepancy (Gilmore et al, 2018; Kasari et al, 2011; Locke et al, 2016)

Kasari et al (2011) found that children with autism were mostly unengaged with others during playtimes, but that they did engage with peers for over a third of the time observed. The authors suggested that some children with autism were more socially engaged with their peers than others, and that when engaged with peers children with autism could be seen talking and playing, engaging in chasing games, and taking part in team sports activities such as football. The authors used the timed interval Playground Observation of Peer Engagement (POPE) tool (originally designed by Kasari et al (2005) in an unpublished manuscript, as cited in Kasari et al, 2011) to compare the social behaviours of children with autism to those without autism. A strength of the study was that independent observers were used, reducing the potential for observer bias. The study was primarily concerned with the

impact of friendships and peer rated popularity on their level of peer engagement, and as such observed children at two playtimes within the same week. The authors used a large sample, including 60 children with autism, and 815 children without autism. Both groups included boys and girls aged 6 to 11, although boys formed the majority of children with autism studied⁴. Children attended one of 30 primary schools within the same county and were from diverse ethnic backgrounds (46% Caucasian, 5% African, 21% Latino, 16% Asian and 10% other). Nonetheless, the authors provided only some insight into the social interactions which *do* occur when children with autism engaged with their peers by listing the types of activities described above, rather than providing detailed descriptions of these interactions.

Locke et al (2016) also used the POPE tool to compare social interactions between children with autism and matched peers without autism at playtime. In line with Kasari et al (2011), the authors found that children with autism spent considerably less time in jointly engaged social activities during playtime when compared with children without autism (Locke et al, 2016) but highlighted that they nonetheless spent considerable time interacting with peers during playtimes, and that some children with autism spend a good deal of their playtimes participating in joint engagement with others through play. For instance, one participant jointly engaged with their peers for one hundred percent of the observed time. When engaged with peers, the authors noted that children with autism took part in activities such as talking with other children, playing imagination games, as well as chasing games. The authors suggested this finding may indicate careful consideration being required when providing social skills interventions for children with autism to support their playtime interactions; since some children appear to manage this time of the school day better than others. It is important to note that children without autism who participated in the study were chosen on the basis of their presenting strong social skills by their class teacher, which may have further inflated the disparity levels of social engagement presented by each group; since not all children without autism will demonstrate the same level of social skills as the sample used. It is therefore possible that the social engagement of children with autism could be closer to the functioning of their peers than Locke et al (2016) indicated.

Another aspect which Kasari et al (2011) considered, but Locke et al (2016) did not, was the extent to which children with autism may show some level of social awareness when playing by themselves. Kasari et al (2011) categorised various levels of awareness and coded observation data. The authors maintained that children with autism were isolated and

⁴ The tendency for research in this area to recruit predominantly male participants will be discussed in the section on 'gender differences'.

completely unengaged with others for 38% of the observed time and engaged directly with peers for 33% of the time. The rest of the time however, children with autism showed varied levels of social awareness through either parallel play 6% (playing similar activities), playing in close proximity of others 8%, parallel aware 7% (playing similar activities in close proximity), and onlooking 8% (directly watching others play). The authors highlighted the importance of considering what occurs between the dichotomy of engaged and unengaged, yet they did not provide details of what children with autism did when they were completely solitary in their play.

A final consideration when considering time spent playing with others is the extent to which children with autism sometimes played with adults at playtime. Kasari et al (2011) suggested that when a child with autism was provided with a supporting adult at playtime, this sometimes led to the child choosing to play with their supporting adult over their peers. Gilmore et al (2018) also suggested that children with autism spent some of their playtimes engaged with adults. Neither of these studies provided details of the kinds of interactions children with autism might have with adults at playtimes, and nor did they make comparisons to how these children compared to children without autism. As such, there is little known about how children with autism interact with adults at playtime.

In sum, there is no consensus on exactly how much less time children with autism appear to spend engaged in social interactions with peers at playtime. Nonetheless, some disparity between the amount of time children with autism engage with peers at playtime is apparent within the literature (Calder et al, 2012; Kasari et al, 2011; Locke et al, 2016). There is also the indication that some children with autism are more engaged with their peers at playtime than others, and that when seemingly unengaged, they may nonetheless show social awareness of their peers.

An important feature of the research literature I focused on was why this disparity may exist. I will now discuss what literature related the preferences of children with autism for either playing with others or by themselves.

2.3.1.2. Preferences related to playing with others or alone

Research has indicated that some children with autism prefer time spent playing alone, whilst others prefer to interact with their peers at playtime (Kasari et al, 2011; Locke et al, 2016). Calder et al (2012) found that when asking children with autism about friendship, they showed varied preferences about playing with others or by themselves. The authors outlined that many children with autism appeared to want to be more socially engaged with their peers at playtime than they were at present, but that some children directly stated when

interviewed that they preferred to play by themselves. Calder et al (2012) furthered this, indicating that adults might successfully encourage social interactions between children with autism and their peers, but that this sometimes went against the wishes of some children with autism to play by themselves. The authors undertook a range of data gathering methods including interviews with children with autism, their parents, and their teachers from several primary schools within the same region. Of the 12 child participants, all were in years five and six, and included one female.

The fact that some of the children with autism in Calder et al's (2012) study were encouraged to interact when they stated that they wanted to play alone highlights the importance of understanding their individual preferences. Moyse and Porter (2015) also found that some girls with autism wanted to be more engaged with others during playtimes, but similarly, that one girl in fact preferred solitary play; she spent her playtimes walking along the periphery of the playground, and dodging children as they became close. Their study was based on in depth ethnographic observations, yet was related to school experiences of girls with autism, and provided only some indications of their participants *playtime* experiences.

Calder et (2012) provided an example of the importance of including children's own views in research which explores playtime experiences, since without this, intervention may conflict with the wishes of some children with autism to spend their playtime alone. Despite the indication that some children with autism do prefer solitary play, Calder et al (2012) gave no indication of how those who preferred solitary play felt about their playtimes. It is therefore unclear whether these children enjoyed their playtimes and experienced positive feelings during solitary play, or whether their solitary play was related to negative emotions. It also remains unclear in their study, what impact being supported to interact more with peers during playtime through adult intervention might have on these individuals (Calder et al, 2012).

Schupp et al (2013) found that cortisol levels during interactions at playtime were higher for primary aged children with autism than children without autism of the same age. They found that primary aged children with autism showed increased levels of cortisol at the beginning of playtime. The authors measured cortisol levels in 52 children with autism and 26 children without autism between the ages of 8 and 12, they used samples taken throughout the school day, and compared these with baseline samples which were averaged over several days to form a cortisol basal measure. These were also compared with playtime observations gained through two video cameras. The authors suggested the possibility of anxiety related to social interactions at playtime and highlighted that those children who

experienced higher cortisol levels at playtime, also appeared to spend more time playing alone. The authors took this as an indication that such individuals preferred time playing alone. It is important to take Schupp et al's (2013) suggestion about anxiety with caution however, since the correlation between cortisol levels and playing alone should not be taken as necessarily causal. It is also likely that changes in cortisol levels when playing with or without peers may not be an accurate measure of their social preferences.

I will now explore the extent to which children with autism may experience social interaction difficulties at playtime.

2.3.1.3. Social interaction difficulties

The research literature suggests that children with autism can have social interaction difficulties which impact on their playtime experiences (Ingram et al, 2007; Kasari et al, 2011; Sanrattana et al, 2014). This will now be discussed.

The potential disparity in levels of social engagement between children with autism and children without autism has also been related to children's social skills; and more specifically to their social initiation and response skills (Calder et al, 2012; Kasari et al, 2011; Locke et al, 2016; Rodriguez-Medina et al, 2018). Locke et al (2016) suggested that being able to initiate peer interactions successfully, as well as being able to respond appropriately to others attempts to engage them in play, was associated with higher levels of social engagement in both children with autism, and children without autism. Kasari et al (2011) found that some children with autism had poorer initiation and response skills than children without autism. Despite this, Locke et al (2016) maintained that although some disparity existed, children with autism were often able to successfully initiate a positive peer interaction, or to respond appropriately to others⁵.

Ingram et al (2007) argued that children with autism showed more socially inappropriate behaviour during play (which they described as being in very close proximity to other children, abruptly ending conversations and walking away, and/or not responding when children attempted to talk or interact with them). Ingram et al (2007) maintained that children with autism were distinguished from the other groups by their difficulties with social interactions during playtimes. The authors conducted analysis on data from structured observations of children without autism, those with learning difficulties⁶, and children with

⁵ Gilmore et al (2018) stated that responding appropriately may look like a child responding to a peer that says 'thank you' with 'you're welcome', rather than with no response.

⁶ The authors did not outline how these children were identified, other than that they were deemed to have SEN.

autism. Their cohort included 81 participants in total, with 20 children with autism, 24 children with other diagnosed disabilities, and 37 children without any diagnosed disability. Participants came from a range of schools, although the authors gave no details of the individual schools or the demographics of their participants. They did however identify that ages for all participants ranged from 5 to 11 years of age.

Ingram et al's (2007) study could be seen as having some weaknesses. Foremost is the use of value laden terms like 'socially inappropriate behaviours', which may have indicated a bias towards making sense of autism as a disorder with associated behaviours, rather than considering the potential appropriateness of those behaviours for their participants. Observers within the original study were not blind to the child's prior diagnosis, which may have created a bias during the observations. For instance, during the coding procedure, observers were required to rate the observed behaviours into categories based on the level of 'appropriate social behaviour shown'. The authors may therefore have been biased by their existing understandings of autism, and appeared to be guided by a medical model of autism as a disorder with associated social communication and play skills deficits. Ingram et al's (2007) study could therefore be taken to illustrate how a medical model of disability exists within the research literature concerning playtime experiences for children with autism, with less known about their strengths, and preferences, and a need for research which takes on a social model or neurodiversity perspective.

Sanrattana et al (2014) surveyed class teachers, and found that teacher's felt children with autism struggled in their social interaction skills in particular. Teachers reported that the children struggled with conversation skills as well as taking part in social play. Teachers also reported seeing children with autism as being identifiable on the school playground by their playing alone or playing differently to the surrounding students.

In sum, there are indications within the literature that some children with autism can have poorer social skills than children without autism. Although a range of studies has suggested such, I have pointed out that care needs to be taken when interpreting the literature on this topic, since some studies appear to come from a particular perspective about how to make sense of autism in children, with not enough currently known about their strengths.

Given the potential for children with autism to have varied preferences for social engagement at playtime, as well as some appearing to have poorer social interaction skills than children without autism, a key aspect within the literature which I considered included what is known about the experiences of children with autism when playing with others at playtime. I will now outline the research evidence in this area.

2.3.1.4. *Experiences when playing with others*

Much of the research literature appeared focused on the negative social experiences some children with autism have when playing with peers at playtime, with only a few references to the potential for positive playtime experiences. I will however try to illustrate both here.

Some studies have suggested that at times, peer interactions between children with autism and those without may result in teasing, rejection and scorn for children with autism (Bitsika and Sharpley, 2014; Ochs et al, 2001; Sainsbury, 2009). Ochs et al (2001) maintained that some children with autism presented with repetitive physical behaviours (such as hand flapping), which impacted on how peers responded to them at playtime.

Ochs et al (2001) highlighted the importance of disclosure regarding the child's ASC diagnosis, since their difficulty in their social skills were viewed by peers as direct violations of social codes. This led these children with autism to experience rejection and teasing during playtime, but when their peers were made aware of a diagnosis, children with autism tended to experience greater acceptance, and were included more within the play of their peers. Ochs et al (2001) used ethnographic methods to observe interactions between children with autism and their peers. Although their study is now dated, Ochs et al (2001) conducted a range of video observations and conducted an in-depth ethnographic exploration of the role of peers in supporting the inclusion of children with autism in their play and interactions.

In her book 'Martian in the playground', Sainsbury (2009) found that many adults with Asperger Syndrome found playtime to be a particularly difficult time of the school day, with experiences of teasing, exclusion from groups, and negative emotions common at playtime. The author presented interview data from adults with Asperger Syndrome (including male and female participants) describing their primary school experiences. This included reference to social experiences at school, including playtime. This book provided a valuable overview to many of the difficulties experienced by children with Asperger Syndrome during school, yet despite the title, there is only minimal reference to playtime experiences, and since participants were adults, reflecting back on educational experiences from at least a decade ago, it is possible that playtime experiences for children with autism may be somewhat different currently.

More recently, Bitsika and Sharpley (2014) found that mothers viewed their children as the victim of bullying from their peers at various points during their school day, and that bullying occurred mostly on the school playground. While the authors gave no single descriptor of

their definition of bullying, they did differentiate between physical acts (hitting, kicking, pushing) and verbal acts (calling names, teasing) which were experienced by children with autism from some peers. An important finding was that children who were known to the child with autism were usually the children who conducted these acts; including fellow classmates and children the child with autism rated as their friend. The authors concluded that children with autism were not always able to detect bullying behaviours in others, and persisted with interactions with those children, leading to further occurrences of physical or verbal aggression (Bitsika and Sharpley, 2014).

Bitsika and Sharpley (2014) suggested that bullying experiences during playtime could explain why some children with autism spend a significant amount of their playtime alone. Participants described feeling angry, sad, lonely and nervous in schools, with many of these feelings associated with both social isolation and stress related to social interactions at playtime. An important aspect of Bitsika and Sharpley's (2014) study was the suggestion that their participants had ineffective coping strategies for dealing with their negative emotional responses (Bitsika and Sharpley, 2014). Moyse and Porter (2015) showed that one coping strategy for a child in their study was to avoid peers during playtime, thus further isolating herself. The authors used questionnaires to explore the perceptions of children with autism and their mothers about bullying experiences in school, and included 48 participant mother and child dyads.

Considering the weaknesses of Bitsika and Sharpley's (2014) study, I noted that the authors did not make explicit which of these experiences occurred during playtime, or during another part of the school day. It is also important to take the authors conclusions with care, since children with autism in this study might also have *chosen* to play with peers who were verbally or physically aggressive towards them. It is important to note that Bitsika and Sharpley (2014) were focused on bullying experiences in schools, which did not consider the positive emotional experiences of children with autism during playtime; nor did their study focus on playtime in particular. Nonetheless, the authors brought together a range of possible experiences some children with autism face at school (including at playtime), and outlined the potential emotional impact of these experiences.

Moyse and Porter (2015) highlighted that it was only through interviews with the children themselves that personal feelings about their experiences were revealed. Using in depth ethnographic observation and interview methods, they found one girl with autism enjoyed her playtimes, and this was related to being happy playing alone but alongside her peers; showing no desire to collaborate or communicate during playtimes. Moyse and Porter's (2015) other participants however reported feelings of loneliness, being unwanted or being

teased, and reported crying was one activity they did at playtime. The authors linked these feelings to the quality of social experiences girls with autism experienced in schools, with breaks being an area which caused the most turmoil. One participant described classroom lessons as a time to take her mind away from playtimes. Moyse and Porter (2015) concluded that where playtime constitutes a welcome break from lessons in school for most children, the inverse can be true for some children with autism. Calder et al (2012) also found that some children with autism experienced negative emotions such as feeling lonely, left out and upset. These participants wanted to interact and play with peers, but felt ignored or outright rejected.

Moyse and Porter (2015) provided an in-depth account of playtime experiences which stands out in the literature due to its inclusion of the perspectives of the individual children. Despite this, their participants were all female, and therefore the detailed account of the emotions experienced at playtime can only be related to girls with autism, with only minimal reference to these experiences by the boys with autism included in Calder et al's (2012) study. This is an important limitation in the literature, since autism is diagnosed in more boys than girls (NAS, 2018).

In sum the research evidence appeared to suggest that children with autism were vulnerable to experiences of being hurt, teased, or called names at playtime, with negative social experiences being a common theme in the literature. A small number of studies have alluded to the possibility for some children with autism have positive playtime experiences, and these have been related to being happy in one's own company (Moyse and Porter, 2015). Locke et al (2016) found that one child with autism was socially engaged with peers for the duration of their observations. Despite this, the potentially positive experiences children with autism may have while socially engaging with peers remains lacking in the literature. The assumption here could be to assume, based on the research evidence, that children with autism either experience negative social interactions with peers, or else play happily by themselves. This may be a limited picture of their playtime experiences, since some children with autism clearly spend more time engaged in social interactions with peers than others, and may enjoy these experiences (Locke et al, 2016). As such, when considering the research literature about the playtime experiences children with autism have when playing with others, there appeared to be bias towards their isolation and towards negative social interactions and a negative emotional impact of this.

Much of the content of the research literature about playtime for children with autism is related to their social experiences, I will now discuss other aspects that appeared important, such as the games children with autism engage in, and their play interests at playtime.

2.3.2. Play interests and activities

The existing literature has suggested that children with autism play a range of activities at playtime, and that their play interests may vary from one another, as well as from those children without autism. This will now be outlined.

Gilmore et al (2018) found that children with autism engaged in a variety of play activities at playtime and outlined that these could be grouped into categories such as: playground games (such as duck duck goose and hide and seek); ball games (such as football and basketball); pretend play (which included a range of imagination games); as well as other varied activities such as playing with toys and dancing. The authors maintained that children with autism engaged with these types of activities with peers for some of the time, and also engaged in object-focused play (playing with toys and playing on playground structures) when more solitary in their play. The authors provided a robust description of the kinds of activities children with autism may play at playtime, and suggested that the participant group engaged in object-focused play for the majority of the time observed, and indicated variations across individual's play interests.

Gilmore et al's (2018) study provided a rich overview of the kinds of games children with autism might engage in at playtime and used a robust mixed-methods design to report both what children were doing qualitatively, as well as how long for. The study included 55 participants, yet no comparison group was included, making it difficult to ascertain how children with autism compared to children without autism in their play interests. The study was also based in the USA, arguably making the findings about particular games children with autism play less relevant to the UK. The authors also failed to provide a detailed description of the possible meaning behind why some children with autism engage in some games. Nevertheless, Gilmore et al (2018) provided the most comprehensive overview of the games children with autism engage in at playtime (as detailed above).

Fernandes and Fernandes (2016) explored the activities children with autism engaged in during playtime, and distinguished organised games (structured activities with explicit rules such as teams sports, including football) from unorganised or casual games (activities without any explicit rules, such as: running with others; playing imagination games and playing with toys). The authors found that children with autism engaged more in unorganised games during playtime but that they nonetheless spent some time engaging in structured games such as football. The study presented no comparison of the level of engagement in structured activities for children without autism. This makes it difficult to know the extent to

which *all* children might engage more in unstructured than organised activities during playtime. Fernandes and Fernandes (2016) did not propose an explanation for why children with autism might engage less in activities which are structured and have specific rules.

Calder et al (2012) indicated that teachers felt that children with autism found the rules within structured games (such as football) difficult to understand at times, despite their attempts to be involved. Calder et al's (2012) study was not solely focused on playtime and did not provide details about the difficulties which rules within structured games could pose children with autism. The authors interviewed primary school class teachers from nine primary schools in the London area, specifically regarding children with autism's play. They compared these with child observations and interviews with children with autism. As such, Calder et al's (2012) study may be seen as robust in the extent of triangulation which was used to support its findings.

In a survey investigating the social skills of children with autism, Sanrattana et al (2014) interviewed teachers across primary and secondary aged children, and suggested class teachers (including those in primary schools) felt that negotiating rules in games at playtime was particularly difficult for children with autism. Again, the study here was not solely focused on playtime experiences, and thus a detailed explanation of why some children with autism find rules within games at playtime difficult was not highlighted.

Rodríguez-Medina et al (2018) compared one ten year old child with autism with his classmates during playtime. The author indicated that this child engaged less in games in the playground than his peers, and that he engaged more with others when they played activities he liked. They also found that this child engaged in a smaller number of activities and played within a smaller range of locations on the school playground compared with children without autism in the same setting. The authors provided no details of what these activity preferences were however, and gave no information as to the type of activities or locations which their participant was described as less engaged in. Instead the authors explored how these preferences impacted on the level of social interactions between both groups, and this itself is limited by the fact that the study was based on just one child with autism.

Dean et al (2017) compared the play of boys and girls, including children with autism and children without autism for both genders. The authors found that boys without autism played more team sports at playtime than girls without autism did. They illustrated that all children's play was more closely related to their gender, than to whether they had autism or not (Dean et al, 2017).

As such, there were a range of studies which suggested the kinds of games children with autism play at playtime, but many of these provided only general information about types of activities they mostly engaged in, with little evidence as to the potential reasons behind these findings. The views of children with autism about the games they play appeared to be an under researched area in the literature. I will now outline one study which did consider their views.

Stephenson and Adams (2016) found that when asking children with autism about playtime, some participants placed more importance in their responses to the physical landscape of the playground, than the social possibilities playtime presented. This was not true of all participants though, with some describing peer-based imagination games they enjoyed playing with others at playtime. The authors carried out a small-scale qualitative study exploring school experiences, using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and interviewed parents and children with autism. Five children and their parents were interviewed and ages of the children ranged from seven to ten years old. Stephenson and Adams's (2016) study provided a valuable account of the views of children with autism about the games and physical activities they enjoy at playtime. The authors indicated, but did not explore, the potential for playtime to have different purposes for some children with autism.

In sum, it appeared that children with autism engage in a range of games at playtime, and that they can have different play interests and preferences. However, those studies which have explored this provide general information about the games children with autism may play, with many studies presenting findings which are incidental to other focal aspects of the research (Fernandes and Fernandes, 2016; Rodriguez-Medina et al, 2018). There are indications that children with autism engage less within organised activities during playtime and are more often seen playing in unorganised games such as imagination games, running and jumping, and play with toys (Fernandes and Fernandes, 2016). There are also indications in the research that games, activities, and the physical landscape of the playground may be more important to some children with autism, than the opportunity to socialise (Stephenson and Adams, 2016). This is important since the research evidence to date has focused on their social experiences at playtime.

Another area highlighted within the literature is the potential for children with autism to be less physically active than children without autism at playtime. This will now be discussed.

2.3.3. Physical activity levels

Evidence has suggested that children with autism may be less physically active during playtime, but discrepancies appear to exist across studies. For instance, Rosser-Standt and Frey (2005) found that children with autism spent 58% of their time during breaks engaged in moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) while children without autism spent 84% of their time in MVPA. The authors investigated the physical activities of both groups of children using accelerometer data⁷ and time interval observation data. Boys and girls were included in both groups, ages ranged from 5 to 12 years, and children came from a range of schools all within the same county. The authors also coded observed behaviours at playtime, into the categories of 'sitting, laying down, walking, standing or very active' and suggested that children with autism spent more time sitting, laying down, or standing, than children without autism. Rosser-Standt and Frey (2005) did not explore why some children with autism spend less time in vigorous activity than children without autism.

Pan (2008) also compared the MVPA of children with autism to children without autism using an accelerometer, but included their lunch playtime; where Rosser-Standt and Frey (2005) did not. The author found that children with autism spent 27% of their time in MVPA compared with 35% seen in children without autism. The author concluded that all children spend little time in MVPA during playtime, but also confirmed that children with autism were particularly low. The author also found no significant differences in the levels of MVPA between morning, lunch time and afternoon breaks. Participants in this study were 24 children aged 7 to 12 years in each group, with only one female participant with autism, and children were recruited from 14 schools, all based within the same geographical area with high social and economic deprivation.

Pan (2008) did not use time-based observations as Rosser-Standt and Frey (2005) did in their study, which could make Rosser-Standt and Frey's (2005) MVPA levels a more reliable measure. However, since the authors provided little detail of those observations or how they related to accelerometer data, it remains unclear the typical levels of MVPA during playtime for children with autism. Nonetheless, both studies indicated a reduced level of time engaged in MVPA for children with autism when compared with children without autism, but did not provide any possible reasons for these discrepancies.

⁷ A movement sensitive electronic device attached to children's clothing.

Another key aspect to consider when understanding the experiences of children with autism is the potential impact of gender differences. I will now discuss what evidence existed within the literature related to the influence of a child's gender on their playtime experience.

2.3.4. Gender differences

Research evidence has suggested gender differences in how girls and boys with autism present (Halladay et al, 2015; Mandy et al, 2012) and that these differences impact on their primary school experiences generally (Dean et al, 2014). Despite this, there is very little research considering the impact of those differences on playtime. Two studies focused on gender differences during playtime in mainstream primary schools for children with autism (Dean et al, 2017, Moyse and Porter, 2015).

Dean et al (2017) outlined that much of the research on children with autism is based on boys, and that a common misconception is that girls with autism will appear as solitary on the school playground in the same ways boys with autism frequently do. The authors argued that this has led to a male bias in how we consider the play of children with autism in primary schools, as well as a more general bias as to how autism presents in children (Dean et al, 2017). The tendency for male bias is likely in the literature outlined in this chapter, with most studies recruiting boys with autism, and only some highlighting the potentially different experiences of their female participants.

Dean et al (2017) found that the play of girls with autism closely matched the play of girls without autism, making their difficulties less easy to notice on the school playground. When compared with the play of boys, both girls with autism and girls without autism tended to play within smaller groups, with less involvement in team sports and more talking, chasing, or ball games involving just two or three children. All girls showed significantly less time playing solitarily than boys. Boys with autism stood out more starkly and were observed playing alone more often than girls with autism. They engaged more than girls with autism in large team sports activities, which the authors suggested could be because boys without autism also engaged more in these activities. The authors suggested that one reason for the isolation of boys with autism when compared with girls with autism could be due to the increased demands of games with rules in team sports activities.

Equally, Dean et al (2017) indicated that girls with autism might experience less obvious social exclusion during playtime than boys, whereby girls with autism might be ignored or overlooked by other girls, rather than being more overtly rejected through teasing or being

hurt the way boys with autism were at times. The authors suggested that girls with autism appeared more socially competent during playtime than boys with autism, but that they might find the increased demands of small close-knit social groups among other girls difficult to access. An important finding Dean et al (2017) presented was that both sexes tended to conform to gender roles in their play. The authors maintained that in participants with autism play was more closely related to their typically developing peers of the same gender, than to participants with autism of the opposite gender.

Dean et al (2017) conducted secondary analysis on observational data using the POPE tool, (from an earlier study by Kasari et al (2015)), and looked more closely at play styles exhibited by each gender. The authors used a robust study design to randomly select 24 boys and 24 girls from the previous sample of 148 children with autism, and compared these with 24 of each gender for children without autism. Participants attended schools in one of four urban areas, and another strength of the study was that all participant groups were matched on age, locality, and school.

Another study which suggested girls with autism may camouflage their differences came from Moyse and Porter (2015), who explored the playtime experiences of girls with autism using ethnographic methods with three participants. The authors found that some girls with autism sat amongst small groups of girls but did not actually participate in conversation (Moyse and Porter, 2015). Moyse and Porter (2015) found one female participant played alone during playtimes, but that this was often camouflaged by her close proximity to other children.

In sum, Dean et al (2017) provided a robust exploration of the different activity's boys and girls with autism play, as well as further clarity about the impact of autism and gender on the kind of games children played during playtime. Moyse and Porter (2015) furthered this to show the ways girls with autism may camouflage their differences. Although Moyse and Porter (2015) carried out extensive observations using ethnographic methods, it is important to consider that their findings are based on just three participants and did not consider the play behaviours of girls without autism. Nonetheless, those few studies that have explored gender in relation to playtime experiences for children with autism, have suggested differences in the types of activities each gender engages in (Dean et al, 2017; Moyse and Porter, 2015) as well as the indication that girls with autism camouflage their differences more than boys during playtime (Dean et al, 2017).

2.3.5. Age differences

Another area which remains under-studied but potentially significant, is the influence of the child's age on the kinds of activities, difficulties, or other playtime experiences children with autism have. I identified just two studies which considered differences between children from different ages, with other studies appearing to view the primary aged group as a single cohort.

As mentioned, Schupp et al (2013) found children with autism showed higher cortisol levels than typically developing peers during playtime (This study confirmed the previous findings of Corbett et al, 2010). This was based on children aged 8 to 12 years old. The authors maintained that children with autism may experience anxiety related to the social situation playtime presents them. Schupp et al (2013) also found that younger children in their study showed lower cortisol levels when approaching other children, when compared with older children, who showed significantly higher cortisol levels during the same activity. The authors concluded that children may develop higher stress levels during playtime as they enter the upper ages of primary school, which could be related to difficulties experienced previously at playtime. It is also important to remember that although changes in cortisol levels correlated with social interactions, there could be a range of explanations for this. There therefore remains very little evidence as to how children with autism change in their playtime experiences as they progress through primary school.

2.3.6. Sensory experiences

The possibility that children with autism experience sensory differences which affect them at playtime is another area which remains under-studied (Ochs et al, 2001; Moyse and Porter, 2015). Sensory differences have only recently been associated with autism and only formed part of the diagnostic criteria in the most recent edition of the DSM - 5, (2013). Research which has considered the possible sensory experiences of children with autism at playtime is scarce, yet the following few studies have provided some indications that sensory differences are part of the experiences some children with autism have at playtime.

Gilmore et al (2018) described the activities children with autism engage in at playtime, and indicated that some children spend some of this time engaged in 'self-stimulatory behaviours' (p.1349) which the authors defined as: motor movements like flapping hands; vocalising such as humming or talking to oneself; and sensory behaviours, such as rubbing playground apparatus, self-hugging, covering ears and picking one's skin. The authors

outlined that sensory behaviours were most often observed when children with autism were engaged in solitary play. As stated before, Gilmore et al (2018) has provided a useful overview of a range of observed behaviours for children with autism at playtime, yet the authors provided little exploration of the potential impact of sensory differences for the children they studied.

Moyse and Porter (2015) observed girls with autism using ethnographic methods and found signs of sensory needs affecting their participants' play skills. They described that one participant attempted to initiate interactions with others through forcing herself between children. Moyse and Porter (2015) explained that this child often showed little awareness of physical or personal space; which the authors equated to sensory needs in their participants. The authors provided very little information about what sensory needs could mean, and was only based on a small number of participants. The authors suggested that it was because of these sensory needs that some children struggled to interact successfully with their peers, yet no details of this were provided, and some confusion existed about whether being dominant with space when interacting with peers might be interpreted as indicating a sensory need in particular.

Ochs et al (2001) also highlighted the impact of sensory differences on how peers perceived children with autism at playtime. They found that children with autism might 'flap' or 'flail' at playtime, and these were maintained as a key reason for the rejection of some children with autism by children without autism. As with Moyse and Porter (2015), it is unclear whether these behaviours represent sensory experiences or are behavioural differences.

In sum, the potential for sensory differences to impact on the playtime experiences of children with autism is a more recent consideration, with Gilmore et al (2018) providing some indications that sensory experiences may be important at playtime. Other research has at times made some suggestion of possible sensory differences at playtime, but there appears to be a lack of clarity within the literature about what behaviour may indicate a sensory difference or experience.

Having explored a variety of themes related to playtime experiences for children with autism, I will now summarise the key aspects of the literature review. This will begin with what the evidence appeared to suggest about this topic. I will follow this with an outline of my position on the research literature, and what gaps appeared to exist.

2.4. Section two: Chapter summary

2.4.1. Key Findings

As indicated, I have explored the existing research literature which has investigated the experiences of children with autism during mainstream primary school playtimes to date. This has included, where possible, research which has directly focused on the child's perspective. The literature covered has highlighted a number of aspects regarding this part of the school day for children with autism:

- Children with autism spend less time playing with other children during their primary school playtimes. During these times children with autism show varied levels of social awareness of others.
- Many children with autism experience social interaction difficulties which affect them at playtime. These difficulties may impact on their level of social inclusion by others, as well as on their ability to initiate interactions with other children. Peers play an important role in the inclusion of children with autism in the social environment at playtime, and this may be linked to the extent to which typically developing peers are aware of the child's diagnosis. Some children with autism do well at playtime, and remain socially engaged and included.
- There are differences in how boys and girls with autism engage with other children, as well as in the games they play at playtime. Boys and girls with autism show more in common with children of the same gender, than with children with autism of the opposite gender.
- Boys with autism may be more socially isolated than girls, spending more time playing alone, and being more overtly rejected by others.
- Difficulties in social interactions can make children with autism at risk of being hurt, teased or called names at playtime, and these are related to negative emotions felt by children with autism, impacting on their wellbeing during the school day. Negative emotional experiences appear related to being ignored or neglected by other children at playtime, as well as to overt rejection from peers.
- Adults can facilitate interactions between children with autism and their peers, but this may sometimes go against what children with autism themselves want.
- Children with autism may change in their cortisol levels in relation to social interactions with peers at playtime as they mature.
- Some children may present with sensory differences which affect them at playtime.
- Some children with autism appear to enjoy spending playtimes alone, and appear to enjoy their playtimes.

- Children with autism engage in a range of solitary and socially engaged activities at playtimes and could have varied play interests.

2.4.2. My Position

The literature on primary school playtime experiences of children with autism presents numerous problems with this area of research. Foremost is the fact that the research literature is dominated by Health-related quantitative research which rarely considers the views of children with autism. Studies have tended to focus on social interactions at playtime. Many of the studies have focused on the school experiences of children with autism more generally, meaning that most of the research literature on playtime experiences for children with autism are about something broader, and therefore can provide only limited insights into experiences during playtime in particular.

Much of the research which focuses on playtime in particular, has used time interval-based observation measures, which focused on social interaction difficulties for children with autism only (including Dean et al, 2017; Ingram et al, 2007; Kasari et al, 2011; Kasari et al, 2015; Locke et al, 2016, Rodriguez-Medina et al, 2018). This may not be surprising given that behaviours which suggest social interaction difficulties are used to confirm a diagnosis of autism currently (DSM 5, 2013). Despite this, there remains inconsistent evidence as to the extent of their social interaction difficulties during playtime, with indications that some children with autism manage well (Kasari et al, 2011; Locke et al, 2016). There is very little strengths-based research in this area, making it difficult to ascertain why some children do well at playtime. This could have created a biased and negative picture in the literature regarding playtime experiences. There is the potential that children with autism struggle more with particular activities such as team sports or organised games with rules at playtime (Dean et al, 2017; Fernandes and Fernandes, 2016), but there remains little research which has considered the games and physical activities children with autism engage in (with Gilmore et al (2018) being the exception). In general, there is only a fragmented picture of what children with autism experience at playtime; beyond the difficulties they experience in social interactions.

There is evidence that adult support may increase social inclusion during playtime, but this may go against the child's wish to play alone (Calder et al, 2012). There is no research exploring views about the role of adults during these times. Moyse and Porter (2015) provided an in-depth qualitative study which considered the views girls with autism have about their school experiences, which included playtime. Yet no similar studies have

explored the perspectives of boys with autism; despite the indication that they experience more overt social challenges than girls at playtime (NAS, 2018). Autism is also diagnosed more in boys than in girls, yet at present, their views about their playtime experiences remains just as lacking from the research literature as the views of girls with autism.

There is a focus on the challenges and negative emotions in both the broader research concerning playtime (Kasari et al, 2011; Locke et al, 2016), as well as those studies which included the child's views (Calder et al, 2012; Moyse and Porter, 2015). There is little research evidence of the potential for positive emotions to be felt during playtime, or what might support positive emotional responses at playtime. This is surprising, given that some children with autism manage well at playtime, either enjoying time alone, or being socially successful (Locke et al, 2016; Moyse and Porter, 2015). The literature review found just one study which has asked children with autism what they enjoy at playtime, with little therefore known about what children with autism value at playtime from their perspective.

In conclusion, the key gaps identified in the literature are:

- There is currently not enough known about the experiences of children with autism during their playtime in mainstream primary schools.
- Beyond their social interaction difficulties, there is not enough known about what occurs during playtime for children with autism.
- There is little research which has considered the views of children with autism themselves, about their playtimes, and no studies which have focused on the playtime experiences of boys with autism.
- There is therefore not enough known about the views of boys with autism about their playtime experiences in mainstream primary schools.

2.5. Section three: The Studies Aims and Research Questions

The aims of the present study are to explore the experiences of boys with autism during mainstream primary school playtimes. I aim to clarify what occurs for boys with autism during playtime, considering their difficulties, but also their interests and strengths. I also aim to focus on the child's perspective, in order to gain the views of boys with autism about their playtime experiences. My final aim in the study is to use a holistic and child-centred approach to exploring the experiences of boys with autism during playtime from their perspective, in order to understand how we can support boys with autism in mainstream primary schools at this time of the school day.

My research questions are:

RQ1: What are the experiences and views of primary aged boys with autism about playtime?

RQ2: How can the experiences and views of primary aged boys with autism inform how we can best support them at playtime?

3. Methodology Chapter

3.1. Chapter Overview

This chapter considers the philosophical underpinnings which guided my early conceptualisation of the research. I will outline these, and then consider how they informed my chosen methodology and individual methods, before detailing my method of analysis. I will also explain the research process that was followed, before highlighting various ethical considerations which guided my approach to conducting the research.

3.2. Aims of the research

The aim of this research was to explore the experiences and views of boys with autism about playtime while attending mainstream primary schools.

I aimed to take a broad perspective on those experiences, considering areas of difficulty, as well as interests and strengths. I also aimed to consider the perspectives of children with autism regarding their own experiences, and in doing so provide a holistic and child-centred approach to exploring their experiences at playtime.

Based on a review of the literature, a number of research questions were generated. My final research questions were:

RQ1: What are the experiences and views of primary aged boys with autism about playtime?

RQ2: How can the experiences and views of primary aged boys with autism inform how we can best support them at playtime?

3.3. Philosophical underpinnings: ontology and epistemology

In order to make sense of how I approached the above research questions, I will first explore the philosophical underpinnings of the study, and consider two terms (ontology and epistemology) which are commonly associated with philosophical debates around research practice (Mason, 2018).

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality, and what it is possible to know about the world, while epistemology is concerned with ways of knowing, how we acquire knowledge, and what may form the basis of our knowledge (Richie et al, 2014). Bryman (2012)

maintained that following the rise of qualitative research methods in the late 1970's, debates about the philosophical beliefs of how we conceptualise reality, and the way we can acquire knowledge, came to the fore in social research practice. Such debates emerged in the 'paradigm wars', in which apposing ontological and epistemological viewpoints were put forward (Gage, 1989).

Two ontological viewpoints or 'paradigms' about the nature of reality commonly compared are those of realism vs relativism (Bryman, 2012). As applied to social research, realism refers to a school of thought that believes that reality exists as a distinct unaltered entity, and the researcher's role is to uncover it (Bryman, 2012). Relativism refers to the understanding that multiple realities may exist, and that reality is a socially constructed entity and thereby influenced by the researcher.

Two epistemological paradigms about the how we can acquire knowledge commonly compared are those of positivism vs interpretivism (Bryman, 2012). On one end of the continuum is that of positivism, in which Comte maintained the assumption that the social world functions like the natural world, and can be measured in terms of invariant laws, obtained through direct observation (Richie et al, 2014). This assumption was questioned by philosophers such as Kant, who proposed that there are other ways of knowing. In his 'Critique of Pure Reason', Kant argued that *'perception relates not only to the senses but to human interpretations of what the senses tell us'* (cited in Richie et al, 2014, p. 11). This 'interpretivist' position argues that direct observation of the social world is privy to each individual's interpretation of what they observe, meaning no single objective reality may exist or be measured (Bryman, 2016). An interpretivist paradigm therefore maintains that knowledge is gained through exploring personal meanings constructed around particular social phenomena (Richie et al, 2014).

Richie et al (2014) pointed out that philosophical understandings and their relationship with social research practice has diversified significantly since the 'paradigm wars', and a range of approaches exist which take a variety of positions on ontological or epistemological questions. Examples of these include 'post positivism', proposed by Popper (1945), which assumes the social world may be observed, but that general laws should be considered critically, since what is observed may be the exception to the rule. Smith (1996) also pointed out that ontological and epistemological assumptions are interrelated, that assumptions about the nature of reality will in some cases pose assumptions about the nature of how knowledge can be acquired, and indicated that any current social research practice will likely adopt a range of stances, which are rarely polarised.

Considering the research aims and specific questions above, my own research sits philosophically within an interpretivist epistemological position. My interest in the views of participants, and their experience, indicates my focus on the personal meanings they may construct about their experiences at playtime. Richie et al (2014) stated that with interpretivist approaches, significance is placed both on the participants, as well as the investigators interpretations of the phenomenon under study. The authors indicated that meanings are situated within social and cultural contexts, and that the researchers own meanings will influence the research process. As a trainee educational psychologist, I felt sure that despite any efforts to remain neutral, my existing work with children with autism would colour how I made sense of their experiences. I was drawn towards a more interpretivist approach to the research topic because of this, as I wanted to be transparent about my own influence on the research, as well as prioritising of the interpretations children.

3.4. Chosen methodology and considered approaches

The philosophical positions I brought to the study led me towards a qualitative approach to the research. I was initially drawn towards more specific research methodologies which take particular theoretical stances, such as Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), or Ethnography (Bryman, 2016; Smith et al, 2009). These were initially alluring, as they provided a clear theoretical framework from which to approach the topic (Bryman, 2016). I later decided to adopt a qualitative methodology, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, and conducting participant observations alongside semi- structured interviews. I will now outline how I came to this decision based on two alternative approaches.

3.4.1. Interpretive phenomenological analysis

Smith et al (2009) outlined that with IPA, the focus is ideographic, meaning the research explores phenomena within a given context, time, and place, and the emphasis is on how participants make sense of their experience within that context. As I wanted to understand the views of children regarding their playtime experiences, this approach may have provided a highly rich data source with a focus on language. However, I was also interested in naturally occurring social behaviours of children with autism at playtime. I was interested in the behaviours of both participants and other individuals at playtime, which may have gone unnoticed by my participants, and I therefore wished to take a broader perspective than to only consider how participants made sense of their experiences through language (Richie et

al, 2014). I was also aware that language, as well as reflecting on social experiences, may have been an area of weakness for some of the participants (Beresford et al, 2004). IPA therefore did not appear to explore the topic in the way I intended. I did however feel that the words of participants needed to be prioritise in my research, since the Literature Review chapter suggested this was lacking in previous research on this topic. I therefore chose to make semi-structured interviews my primary source of data collection, as this would allow participants to have some say in what was discussed, but also enabled the interview to remain focused (Bryman, 2016).

3.4.2. Ethnography

Given my interest in observing behaviours occurring within the context of playtime, another possible approach could have been to conduct an ethnographic study (Richie et al, 2014). Ethnography is typically understood as developing from social anthropology research practice, yet its historical roots are complex, and the exact practices involved in an ethnographical approach vary, and continue to be redeveloped (Richie et al, 2014). In order to clarify where my research aligned with and diverged from an ethnographic study, I have summarised Bryman's (2016) description of the researcher's role when conducting an ethnographic study:

1. Immerses themselves in a social setting for an extended period, and makes regular observations with natural curiosity of a range of social behaviours.
2. Conducts interviews with key informants to gain insight beyond the parameters of direct observation.
3. Develops an understanding about the culture of the group and their behaviour in that social setting.
4. Uses detailed descriptions to form the basis of their final account.

Considering point one, that the researcher immerses themselves within the world of the participant, I was initially drawn to this, since I aimed to explore playtime experiences, with a focus on how participants might make sense of these experiences. However, I was not aiming to 'immerse' myself in this social setting, since I only wished to add further insight into the words of participants through triangulating these with observation notes. I indeed intended to create detailed descriptions of the observations I carried out to gain insight into the 'culture' of participants daily experiences at playtime (point three). I also intended to interview participants to go beyond what may be observed (point two). Yet I did not intend to create extensive descriptions developed over an extended period (points one and four),

since my aim was to add insight to participants views gained through interview, rather than to immerse myself in their experience.

Additionally, research has suggested that during playtime, children engage in a social world which is distinct from adults, and that when adults are present at playtime, children seek to avoid contact, or else are highly influenced in their behaviours by those adults (Knowles et al, 2013; Mulryan-Kyne, 2014; Thomson, 2007). As such I felt my presence during playtimes may be influential on the behaviours and conversations I aimed to observe, and that I might only have been assigned an adult role at playtime, remaining separate from the social world of children during playtime due to my adult status. As stated in the Literature Review Chapter, children with autism have seldom being asked about their playtime experiences. I therefore wanted in-depth personal accounts through interviews to be the primary focus of the research, with observations only forming additional insight into the words of participants. Bryman (2016) stated that one way to increase the strength of a given piece of research or set of themes, is through triangulating a range of data sources together. The value of providing rich descriptions during observations in order to gain insight into the 'culture' of participants was certainly influenced by ethnography, and triangulating this with interviews I felt brought strength to my approach to the study.

I therefore opted for a research approach which was guided more by my research questions, context, and the needs of my participants, rather than choosing a methodological approach with a particular theoretical stance and specific methods. My chosen methodology was qualitative, and the specific methods I adopted for data collection were participant observations, and semi-structured interviews. Ethnography influenced how I conducted the observations I carried out; with the principle of being naturally curious about a range of behaviours being a key difference in my approach to much of the existing literature.

I will now consider my sampling and recruitment approach, followed by further detail of the research process and two data collection methods used.

3.5. Sampling and recruitment

Bryman (2016) maintained that the purpose of qualitative research is usually to explore cases which are highly relevant to the research questions, and sampling is therefore often done in a purposive, rather than random, way. The author described this approach as 'purposive sampling', which was used with the following inclusion criteria:

- a) Participant attends a mainstream primary school in the local authority and is not in their Reception year.
- b) Participant is diagnosed with ASC or Asperger's Syndrome.
- c) Participant has no other diagnoses or impairments.
 - i. E.g. A participant with ASC who also has a visual impairment would be excluded.
 - ii. E.g. A participant with ASC who is also diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyper Activity Disorder would be excluded.
- d) Participant can communicate verbally; they are able to express themselves in short phrases with four-word level as a minimum.
- e) Participant is male.

These criteria were applied since the study focused on mainstream primary schools in particular. I did not include children attending a Reception class as playtimes of these children are typically separate, and play itself forms an integral part of the curriculum at this age, meaning playtimes may be experienced somewhat differently to the rest of the school. The study was about children with autism, yet there are varying diagnostic practices with similar children receiving a diagnosis of ASC or Asperger's Syndrome, with both experiencing comparable social communication difficulties (DSM 5, 2013; ICD 10, 2015). I chose to exclude those children for whom an interview might be difficult to access, but did include children whose language was underdeveloped. Those children with additional impairments not directly related to ASC were excluded, as these may also impact on children's experiences at playtime. Importantly, participants were not required to have existing difficulties during playtime or be known to the educational psychology service in order to take part in the study. This was because I aimed to gather a broad range of potential experiences related to playtime, rather than focusing solely on the children who may be experiencing difficulties.

All participants were recruited during May 2018 from within the local authority where I was on placement. The local authority covered a large area, with the educational psychology service supporting schools through several locality bases. As such, schools were initially contacted from the area I was based within, and the nearest second area base, and included 42 primary schools, all residing within the central area of the same highly populated urban area. School headteachers and secretaries of the 42 schools were contacted via email with an expression of interest form (see Appendix 1) and information sheet (see Appendix 2). Schools were given two weeks to confirm their interest in the study, after one week a follow up email was sent to all 42 schools reminding them to express interest within one week

should they wish to participate. Schools were clearly informed that a large number of schools had been contacted within the local area, and that should more than six individual schools agree to participate, an initial six schools would be selected at random, with further schools being randomly selected and contacted in the event of a parent or child not also agreeing to participate. This phase of the recruitment procedure produced five primary schools who expressed interest in becoming involved, with four of these schools having more than one potential participant.

Once schools had expressed interest to be involved in the study, a named lead within each school was agreed (the school SENco was nominated by the school in every school which took part), who I liaised with during the recruitment phase. During this phase I provided clear participant criteria to the named lead within each school, supported the lead to contact appropriate parents with information on the study, and a parental expression of interest form (see Appendix 3 and 4). Parents were given two weeks to express interest. This phase of recruitment produced 8 parents who were interested in their child participating in the study. Parents and participants were then met with in turn to discuss the study, and gain their consent to participate; no potential participants were met before their parent. All 8 parents gave consent, and following this I met with individual children to discuss the study, and ask for their consent. Research has suggested that children with autism benefit from visual representations of words in order to access conversations and help make sense of language (Meadan et al, 2011). I therefore used visuals to support the discussion with individual children about the study (see Appendix 5), and used an adapted consent form with visuals to gain their final consent (see Appendix 6).

I informed potential participants that they did not have to participate, and that they could let the named lead know if they changed their mind about involvement later that day, or the next day, and it was agreed that the named lead would check any children who agreed to participate were still interested in doing so the following day. Participants were reminded of their right to change their mind about participating again on the day of the first observation, and immediately before their interview. Participants were informed they could choose to remove their data from the study without giving a reason both during the initial meeting to gain their consent, and again at the end of their interview. Participants were informed they could remove their data up to one week after their interview took place.

All parents and children were informed that consenting to the study did not ensure they would be part of it, and that they would be informed the week following my meeting with the potential participants if their child had been randomly selected to be part of the study. The eight potential participants were assigned a number, and six were randomly selected using

an online random selection generator. Each of the five schools which agreed to take part had at least one child participating in the study, with one school having two children participate. Below is further information regarding all six participants, including their age, whether they were aware of their diagnosis, and the level of support they had in school and at playtime. Names used are assigned pseudonyms (see ethical considerations for a further discussion of the use of pseudonyms).

Table 1: showing further information related to participants.

Name	Year group	Aware of diagnosis	Teaching assistant support.
Liam	Year six	Aware	No
Sam	Year five	Not aware	At playtime and in class
Morgan	Year five	Aware	No
Alex	Year four	Aware	At playtime
Noah	Year four	Aware	In class
Logan	Year one	Not aware	At playtime and in class

As highlighted, most participants were within Key Stage two, with the exception of Logan. Logan and Sam were unaware of the diagnosis, yet all other participants knew their diagnosis. Some participants had support from a teaching assistant. Sam, Alex and Logan all had support from a teaching assistant at playtime.

3.6. The research process

Following the recruitment phase of the research, data collection took place between June and July in 2018, and occurred on Thursdays and Fridays in every case. Two participant observations were conducted before interviews for each participant. All participants were observed for both morning and lunch playtimes, and no participant was observed at morning and lunch playtime on the same day. I observed more than one participant for each data collection day, meaning that participants were placed in data collection pairs. Child A would be observed first during their morning playtime, and on the following data collection day would be observed at lunch playtime, while Child B would be observed on the same days but at the alternate playtimes. Both would then be interviewed separately on the third data collection day. This process was completed three times until data had been collected for all

six participants. One of the three pairs of participants were within the same school, the other four participants were paired with a participant from a different school. The following table outlines my data collection strategy of each pair:

Table 2: showing data collection process strategy.

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Child A	Morning observation	Lunchtime observation	Interview
Child B	Lunchtime observation	Morning observation	Interview

Following participant observations, I conducted individual interviews with participants on the school site. All participants were reminded of the details of the study, and that their participation was voluntary, before the interview. Three participants had a one-to-one teaching assistant during school. They were given the choice whether or not to have them present during the interview. Two participants chose to have their teaching assistant present during the interview, the other did not. Regardless of the presence of a teaching assistant at interview, I led the discussion as the researcher, following the topic guide (see Appendix 7). Teaching assistants were reminded of the importance of confidentiality, and that they were not part of the interview but there to ensure the participant felt comfortable, and as such should not provide answers to questions or explain participants answers in any way. (A further discussion of the potential influence of the presence of a teaching assistant is discussed in ethical considerations below).

The topic guide was intended as a visual interview schedule, based on the suggestions of Meadan et al (2011) to use visuals to support discussions with children with autism. The schedule was first created by considering my research questions, ensuring I would cover a range of aspects of playtime experiences (relating to peers, adults, play interests, what helps, what does not help). The aim of the topic guide was to explore participants experiences in a more holistic way than some previous research. The topic guide was present during all interviews, was focused on more when participants did not take the lead in guiding the conversation, becoming a visual prompt about what we were discussing.

I chose to use arts-based resources such as Lego, story boards, scaling activities⁸ during the interview with the purpose of aiding the discussion (see 'data collection' section for

⁸ Scaling activities: participants were presented with a number line (1-10) and asked to place activities in order of preference and then discuss them. One represented 'least likes' and ten 'most likes'.

further explanation of this). As all participants were verbal, these were used as visual prompts for further discussion, rather than to create a further data source.

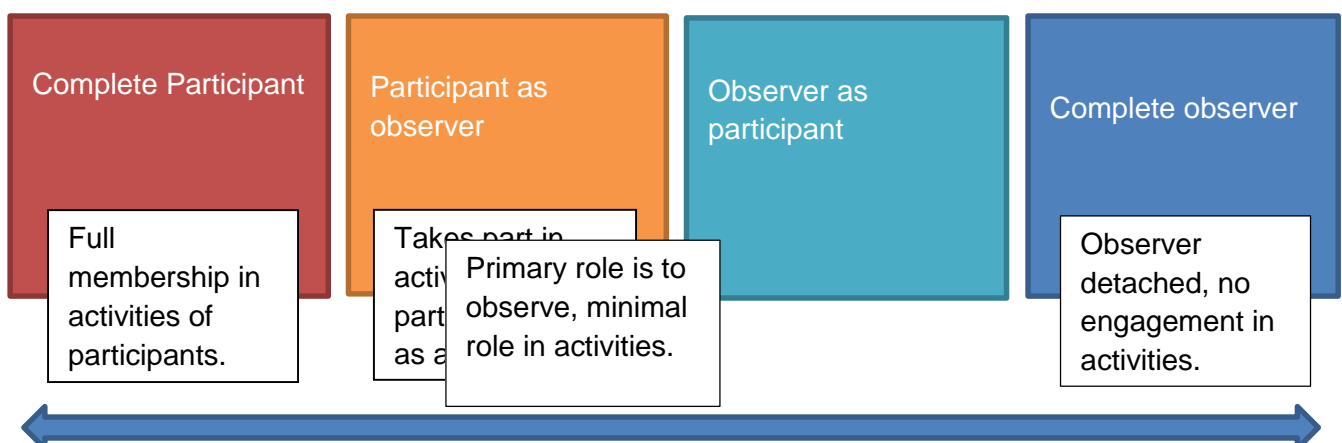
3.6.1. Data collection

My chosen methodology was qualitative, and the specific methods I adopted for data collection were participant observations, and semi-structured interviews. I will now consider the chosen methods in more detail.

3.6.1.1. Participant observations

Qualitative observations are often categorised into two distinct approaches: participant and non-participant observation (Bryman, 2012). With participant observation the researcher immerses themselves in the typical activities of their participants as much as possible, whereas with non-participant observation, the researcher's primary role is to observe without influence, and therefore should avoid participation. As cited in Richie et al (2014), Gold's (1958) spectrum of participation outlines the researcher's level of participation in more detail.

Figure 2: showing Gold's (1958) model of observer level of participation.



I viewed my observations as falling within the 'observer as participant' category. My presence on the playground was known to participants, and both they, as well as other children engaged with me during these times. However, I did not take part in the activities of the children, and aimed to be as unobtrusive as possible while observing. Some children may have perceived me as taking part in the regular activities of adults during playtime. However, I carried a notebook with me during playtimes, and took extensive field notes. When children approached me for support or to talk, I explained I had some writing I needed

to complete and that they should seek one of their teachers. In this way, I did not fully participate in the activities of either the children or adults at playtime, yet my role in observing was overt, and I was not detached from events and interactions as they unfolded. In this sense data collection could be described as participant observations, with myself as an 'observer as participant' according to Gold's (1958) spectrum.

2.6.1.1. Fieldnotes

I chose to maintain an ethnographic approach to observations, making brief fieldnotes, based on a running commentary of everything I saw and heard. Gilbert (2012) stated that standard practice when producing fieldwork is to create a running description of people and events as they unfold, and that this should be as detailed and descriptive as possible, to allow multiple avenues of analysis later. My fieldnotes began with brief notes on the physical context (weather, size of playground, equipment and layout) for the first three minutes of every observation, followed by more detailed notes or 'jottings' on the behaviours which I observed directly relating to participants, for the remainder of the observation. I made open ended notes of what was done and said by participants, how they reacted to particular events or interactions with others, how others (adults and children) responded to them, as well as the games they played and how they engaged in play.

Richie et al (2014) stated that when conducting observations in which the researcher may record behaviours or events openly, that data is developed through '*an intersubjective process between themselves as researchers and what they are observing*' (Richie et al, 2014, p. 245). The authors maintained that from an interpretivist position, what is observed and noted down in this process is considered subject to interpretation and selection, and final data is considered as *created through* the research process, and should not be viewed as an uninfluenced portrayal of what occurred. The extent to which the researcher influences behaviour is also important from an interpretivist perspective (Bryman, 2012). Despite this potential dilemma, Richie et al (2014) highlighted that when carrying out observations from an interpretivist position, the reactions a researcher has to the phenomena under study, and their influence on the data produced must be carefully considered, but may also add valuable insight into their own expectations brought to the topic.

In light of the above, while noting what participants said, did, and played with, I made a separate list of my initial impressions of what I observed. I recorded my reactions, thoughts, feelings, as well as any initial interpretations I brought to the observation, alongside the running commentary of behaviours and talk. This aimed to both add to data through additional information, while also limiting the extent to which my own interpretations

influenced the running commentary. The below model outlines how observations were structured:

Table 3: showing how observation notes were structured.

Time	Running commentary notes:	My reactions:
0-3 minutes into observation	Physical context: notes of weather, playground layout, size and equipment.	Notes of how I feel/what I first notice when walking out on to the playground.
3 minutes onwards	Behaviours and activities: notes of what was said, done, and played with by participants and those around them.	Notes of thoughts/feelings/early interpretations of the observed behaviours and activities.

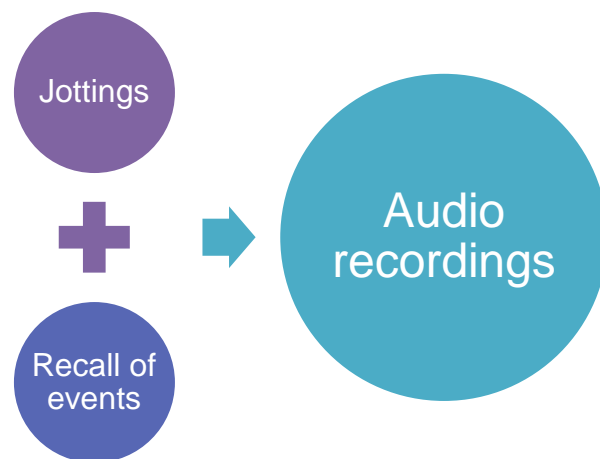
Where playtime occurred indoors, the same procedure was followed, with notes of the physical context being related to class size, layout, games and resources available. The same timings were given to morning observations of playtime (lasting fifteen minutes) as to lunch time observations (ranging from forty-five minutes to one hour). Indoor playtime observations occurred on four occasions in total. Where participants approached myself, I included notes of the conversation. Jottings made at this stage were brief, and I used two methods to add detail to my observation notes which I will now highlight. (For an example of my jotted notes see appendix 18).

3.6.1.2. Audio Recordings

Gilbert (2012) stated that an alternative to writing fieldnotes commonly used during participant observation is to create audio recordings. The author warned however that audio recordings may lose the depth that is achieved through the process of writing, as writing tends to create a catalyst for further reflection. Although I chose to produce fieldnotes during playtime, it is important to note that creating a running commentary during a busy primary school playtime requires capturing a vast amount of information. As such, the jottings could

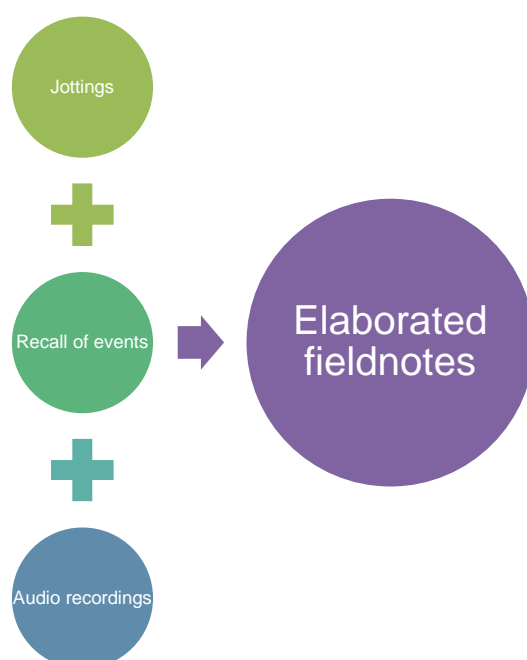
be seen as only capturing key components of what I observed. Gilbert (2012) also maintained that the researcher's ability to recall events following observation reduces greatly after a few hours. Therefore, in order to capture the greatest amount of detail, whilst ensuring some of the depth created through writing fieldnotes, I created audio recordings immediately after each observation, using both the initial jottings made, as well as my recall of events, in order to create a more detailed description of the playtime I had observed. This involved describing the events I had seen from the beginning of playtime to the end in the same 'running commentary' approach, and I used the jottings I had taken as a prompt of details and events I had noticed. For an example of my jottings and transcribed audio recordings, see appendix 18 and 19). Below is a graphic outlining how audio recordings were generated:

Figure 3: showing how audio recordings were generated.



Due to Gilbert's (2012) warning of the value of written fieldnotes, I chose not to transcribe the recordings, but instead used both the detailed audio recordings, alongside my initial notes to create elaborated fieldnotes (see Appendices 12 and 14 for examples of my elaborated fieldnotes and early coding). Audio recordings were created immediately after a playtime observation, and elaborated fieldnotes were created later that day. Below is a graphic outlining how elaborated fieldnotes were generated:

Figure 4: showing how elaborated field notes were generated.



Elaborated fieldnotes were created by returning to the original jottings, and listening to the audio recordings. However, elaborated fieldnotes most closely resembled the audio recordings, with any additional details added in order to clarify aspects of the audio recording. For instance, where I stated within the audio recording ‘he went and gave the child the frisbee back’ I wrote within the elaborated fieldnote ‘Alex walked towards the boy he had first spoke with, and gave back the frisbee before walking away again’. The process of producing jottings, audio recordings, and finally elaborated fieldnotes was completed twice for all participants. (For an example of how elaborated fieldnotes were created, see appendix 12, 18 and 19, in which original jottings, audio recordings, and elaborated fieldnotes are presented from my lunchtime observation of Noah). This was then followed by interviews with each participant individually; I used creative methods to support the conversation, which will now be discussed.

3.6.1.3. *Semi-structured interviews and creative methods*

Following two observations, each participant was interviewed using a semi-structured interview approach (Bryman, 2012). Bryman (2012) explained that semi-structured interviews involve the researcher generating broad areas or questions related to the research topic, but with some flexibility during the interview to allow what may be seen as significant answers or unforeseen aspects of the research topic to be explored. Prior to interviews, a topic guide was developed to support the conversation during interviews (see

Appendix 7). Semi-structured interviews were chosen here since a highly structured interview may not have allowed new aspects to be explored, while an unstructured or narrative interview could place additional demands on the language skills of participants.

As mentioned in the Introduction chapter, children with autism experience a range of difficulties, which Beresford et al (2004) stated are likely to impact on their participation in research, particularly with interview. The authors suggested numerous ways in which a child with autism may find an interview situation difficult. These included anxiety during social interactions, underdeveloped language skills, a dislike of change, as well as a focus on the concrete and the present. As such, ensuring the comfort of participants was a primary focus of the interview stage, and I did three things to support this.

Firstly, as mentioned, participants were only included where they had some language skills and were able to express themselves in at least basic sentences. Secondly, participants were also told in advance of when their interview would be. The use of visual prompts and practical activities is a common way of supporting participants who may otherwise struggle to express themselves or manage the social demands of interview (Malet et al, 2010). Beresford et al (2004) stated that using visual methods with children with autism is particularly useful in order to support their difficulties with the language aspect of the interview. The authors also indicated that practical activities may reduce anxiety associated with the social interaction required during interview. As such, the third way I tried to ensure the comfort of participants during their interview was through providing story boards, scaling activities (see footnote above), and Lego activities.

Creative methods such as Lego and story boards were used in order to facilitate the conversation and were not used as further data themselves. At the beginning of each interview, I placed both the topic guide, a box of Lego, and several empty comic strip pieces of paper to one side of the table. For the first two participants (Sam and Liam), I chose to use the Lego in order to explore one aspect of the topic guide in more detail. This involved exploring the participants 'best playtime', and I asked each participant to build a playtime they would like. In both cases however, the use of Lego appeared to distract participants from the conversation. As such, these activities became a back-up in case a direct conversation appeared challenging for a participant. The activities were present at every interview, but were only used following the first two interviews in the case of Logan. Logan was asked to draw some aspects of his best playtime just as Sam and Liam had built theirs, and I made this decision because Logan gave brief answers when speaking with me. Although I did not use creative methods for the other three participants interviews, I used the same question related to a 'best playtime', which was based on the topic guide. I did not use

any visual information gained through those interviews which included a creative element in the final analysis. For further reflections of the use of creative methods see 'reflections on my personal and professional development'.

3.7. Method of Analysis

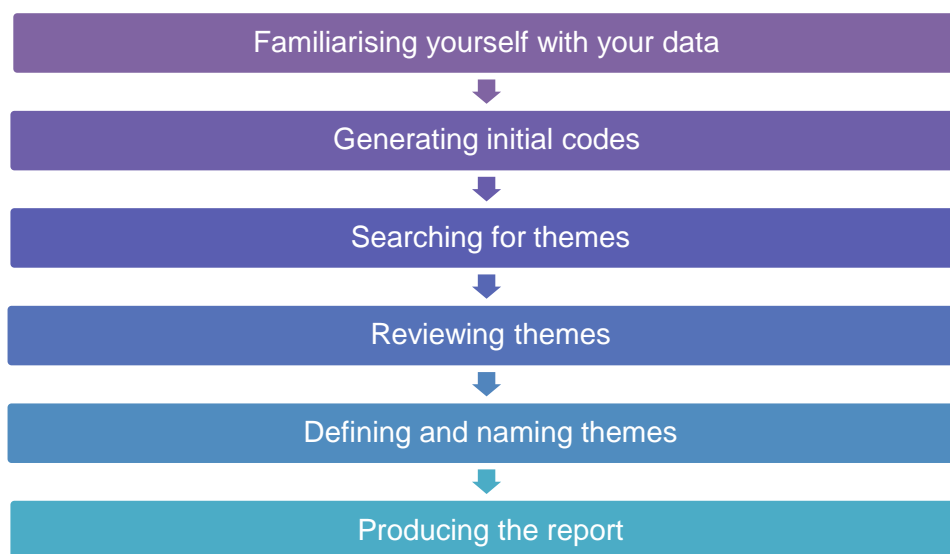
3.7.1. When does analysis begin?

In order to develop themes from the observation and interview data, I followed the Braun and Clarke (2006) approach to thematic analysis. Within this, the authors stated that the first point of analysis starts when the researcher begins to transcribe their data. However, the authors description of analysis is based on research where interview is usually the primary source of data. Since all interviews were preceded by two observations, I had already undergone a process of recording details of playtime in writing, as well as my initial thoughts and interpretations. Bryman (2012) said that when conducting participant observation, the first point of analysis begins during the observation, and is developed further when creating more detailed fieldnotes. Analysis at this stage included interpretive comments or additional thoughts, while a thorough, systematic approach to analysing the data began when using thematic analysis of both observation and interview data. I did not begin the process of familiarisation with the data at the point of transcription as Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, but brought to the early stages of their method, some initial thoughts about possible ways of interpreting the data. It was important to be open-minded to various ways of interpreting the data throughout the analysis for this reason.

3.7.2. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out using Braun and Clarke's (2006) method. Thematic analysis generally involves identifying patterns of meaning within the text and grouping these together to form themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The authors cautioned that there is often ambiguity around the use of thematic analysis, as well as high variation in its use. I therefore followed the Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stage model of thematic analysis.

Figure 5: showing Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis.



This involved an in-depth approach to data collection in which interviews were first transcribed, and then observation and interview data were read and re-read. The process of creating themes then began with noting interesting features or providing summary to the data in a systematic way for all data, before collating codes into possible themes. I then considered how data fitted within these themes, added to them, or in some cases indicated further themes. The final stage of the analysis was completed during the write up, and the analysis was a recursive process, taking place between June 2018 and May 2019. Final themes were generated through combining all data from both data collection methods and across all participants.

Braun and Clarke (2006) maintained that themes might be indicated by the number of times a similar code is given across the entire data set, or from one individual participant. The authors also suggested that sometimes a theme may be indicated by the pertinence of a particular aspect of the data, and that sometimes both approaches may be used simultaneously by researchers to generate themes. I attempted to generate themes which were the most universal to the entire group at first, yet given that participants gave very different accounts, I wanted to ensure the breadth of experiences were captured by the research and therefore opted to also suggest themes based on the pertinence of particular comments. Where a code only appeared for one participant, I highlighted this within the Findings chapter. I also presented individual summaries of each participant in the Findings chapter, before considering themes at a group level. I aimed to shed light on the unique experiences of each participant, as well as indicate universal aspects of the data as a whole.

Braun and Clarke (2006) indicated that thematic analysis is a highly flexible approach to analysis since it does not exist within a prescribed theoretical position, and could be used in both an essentialist, as well as constructivist way. Despite this benefit, the authors maintained that clarity around *how* thematic analysis is carried out was essential, in order for research to remain philosophically coherent. Since the study was influenced by an interpretivist epistemology, I took the stance that the codes and themes were only an interpretation of the views of participants; I did not consider the words of participants to be a direct portrayal of universal truths about their experiences, but rather a co-produced interpretation of their experiences.

3.7.3. Analysing a varied interview data set

A further aspect of the analysis which related to making sense of the interview data in particular, concerned the broad range of language skills the six participants had. For instance, some participants appeared highly articulate about their playtime experience, while others struggled at times to express their thoughts coherently. Below I provide an example of two quotes from participants reflecting on the same interview question. These are used to demonstrate the differences between the data generated from individual interviews.

Table 4: *demonstrating the range of interview data from participants*

Participant: Sam (pseudonym)	Participant: Noah (pseudonym)
<p>Researcher: Tell me about the worst playtime you've ever had?</p> <p>Sam: I get so (...) I get so (...) I, well (...)</p> <p>R: Mmmm?</p> <p>S: Well (...)</p> <p>R: Not sure, is there a lot to think about?</p> <p>S: Yes. It's complicated.</p>	<p>Researcher: Can you tell me about the worst playtime you've ever had now?</p> <p>Noah: well yesterday was move up morning, so at break time it was a bit overwhelming coz I had to get used to, because obviously there was Year six and the infant school, and that was a bit overwhelming coz there was, like my brain, it cannot really cope, because I'm not used to that many people in the playground. Coz the Year six's they did not go to the secondary school you see?</p>

Given the varied way in which participants expressed themselves, rather than focusing on the words of those more articulate, I aimed to reflect all participants perspectives equally in the analysis. (See 'reflections on personal and professional practice' for a further reflection of this).

3.8. Quality Criteria for qualitative research

Braun and Clarke (2013) stated that when evaluating qualitative research there are no absolute quality criteria, but that it is possible still to judge whether a qualitative study has been conducted well. The authors indicated that applying traditional concepts used to evaluate quantitative research can be difficult, since these concepts are often rooted in realist paradigms which some qualitative studies (the present one included) do not adhere to. For instance, quantitative research is often judged based on both its reliability (the extent to which data might be reproduced should the same circumstances be created) and validity (the extent to which the research provides an accurate measure of what it aims to measure). Braun and Clarke (2013) highlighted the difficulties with applying such quality criteria to qualitative research, since reliability is rooted in the idea that an external reality exists and can be accessed through language, while validity imposes the view that an accurate measure of that reality is possible. The authors maintained that these quality criteria may not always be appropriate for qualitative research, particularly when an interpretive approach to the research is adopted where the researcher is viewed as a 'co-producer' of the final themes, and in which findings are viewed as one interpretation of the data. In these cases, they suggested that aiming to adhere to such criteria in their narrowest sense may actually reduce the benefit of the qualitative researcher's skills in contributing to the interview process, but also goes against the ontological and epistemological standpoint of an interpretive philosophy.

Nonetheless, Braun and Clarke (2006) indicated that without a clear set of quality criteria from which to evaluate qualitative work, one common criticism has been the '*anything goes*' nature of qualitative research. In order to clarify how the present study might be evaluated, I will now explore Yardley's (2000) model of 'open ended, flexible' quality principles. I will also detail how the present study answered key aspects of the present criteria.

3.8.1. Yardley's (2000) Quality Principles

Yardley (2000) maintained that qualitative research should be judged based on four principles. These were: *sensitivity to context*, *commitment and rigour*, *transparency and coherence*, and *impact and importance*.

Figure 6: showing Yardley's (2000) quality principles.



2.8.2.1. Sensitivity to context

Yardley (2000) stated that in order for qualitative research to be deemed good, the researcher should show sensitivity to the context of the research by contextualising the research within theoretical and empirical literature, being sensitive to participants perspectives, being aware of ethical issues related to participant groups, and being sensitive to not impose the researchers own meanings onto the data. Braun and Clarke (2013) also explained the benefit of member checking (conferring with participants about early interpretations) which may fit well within this aspect of Yardley's (2000) model. In order to meet these criteria, I conducted a literature review on the topic in question. I used semi-structured interviews as the main source of data collection to allow participants own views to be explored beyond the interview schedule/topic guide. I also carried out additional visits following early interpretation and checked whether participants agreed with my early interpretations of their words.

2.8.2.2. Commitment and rigour

Yardley (2000) suggested that thorough data collection, good depth and/or breadth at the analysis stage, methodological competence as well as in depth personal and professional engagement with the topic were important within qualitative research. This aspect of Yardley's (2000) quality criteria is demonstrated by the in-depth approach to data collection, gained through multiple methods, in order to generate themes based on in depth thematic analysis. I have also highlighted my existing experiences both personally and professionally with children with autism, as well as with play.

2.8.2.3. Transparency and coherence

Yardley (2000) indicated that analysis within qualitative research should be presented with a persuasive line of argument, and that there should be a clear fit between the research question and theoretical frameworks used, as well as with the methods used to gain and analyse data. I provided data at all stages of observations as well as interviews in order to remain transparent about the process of analysis carried out. These include elaborated fieldnote excerpts, interview transcript excerpts, summaries of individual findings, and theme a theme/subtheme summary table (see Appendices 11-16).

2.8.2.4. Importance and Impact

Finally, Yardley (2000) highlighted the necessity for the impact or importance of the research to be considered, but that this should only be judged in relation to what the aim of the research was. In this sense, validity which might aim to generalise the study's findings might not be the criteria by which the study is judged (Braun and Clarke, 2013), but instead the extent to which the research has impact, creates positive change, or adds to our understanding of a particular issue or group within this specific context. Braun and Clarke (2013) also highlighted that qualitative research findings may aim to gain rich data within one specific context, which while not generalisable to other contexts in a linear sense, may nonetheless provide valuable insight into related situations, contexts, or people. Given that the study was conducted within primary schools, while it may not be possible to generalise every aspect of the findings, it is likely that themes found through the research could reflect similar issues within other primary school contexts for similar groups of children.

2.8.2.5. Reflexivity

Another important component of Yardley's (2000) criteria was that of reflexivity, meaning an in-depth consideration of the researchers influence on the research through using particular research methods, or through particular values or beliefs which may bias the research in some way (Richie et al 2014). This aspect is described within the 'transparency and coherence' part of Yardley's (2000) criteria traditionally. Reflexivity was a key aspect within the research process due to the participant observation component within the data collection. This is because while any qualitative research brings the potential for the researcher's perceptions to unintentionally influence the research, during participant observation, raw data is generated directly through the researcher's perceptions, which increases their level of influence on the final themes (Bryman, 2012). This process also influenced the way in which I engaged in the interview. It was not possible during interviews to gather data in an entirely neutral way, since I had already engaged in some early

interpretation. This however allowed for questioning around particular areas that might have otherwise been lost.

Finley and Gough (2003) stated that the use of reflexivity within qualitative research does more than merely tackle biases, instead, they suggested that reflexivity may add further depth to the research through consideration of expectations, values and perceptions which may exist around the topic under question. In order to remain accountable however for my own influence on the research, I did various things. As mentioned, I attempted to separate my early interpretations during participant observations. I also followed up each interview by making audio recordings of my answers to a series of questions developed to help me consider the views and meanings that might influence how I engaged with the data. These were:

- *What are my hopes for this participant?*
- *What are my fears for this participant?*
- *What are my thoughts about what the participant did not say?*
- *How do I feel about myself as a professional in relation to this participant?*

These audio recordings were reflected on following the completion of themes within the analysis, but not during coding, in order to reflect on the potential influence my perceptions may have had on the analysis stage of the research. (See 'Reflections on my personal and professional development' for further discussion of this). A final element which felt important within the research came at the write up stage with the decision to use the first person, in order to illustrate my influence on the research process, and to fit with the interpretivist approach taken (Bryman, 2012).

The following section is based upon an essay submitted to the University of Bristol by Dunning (2018).

3.9. Ethical considerations

Phelan and Kinsella (2013) argued that ethical dilemmas abound when conducting research involving children. As this study also involved young children with SEND, ethical considerations were particularly important (Malet et al, 2010). I will now explore these in turn.

3.9.1. Informed consent

The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2014) stated that for children under the age of 16 years old, parents must consent for their child to take part in research. The code also stated that children should still give their 'assent' or agreement to research participation, and that both parents and child participants should be given all the information about the study required to make an informed decision. Malet et al (2010) maintained that for children with SEND, information should be adapted to the needs of participants to ensure their access. In accordance with these criteria, I first gained the agreement of the school (see Appendix 1 and 2 for expression of interest and school information forms). I also met with parents and children with adapted information to support both parents and participants to access the information and make an informed decision. For participants, this included a visual based information sheet and consent form (see Appendix 5 and 6).

Phelan and Kinsella (2013) also highlighted the potential power dynamics which can arise between researcher and child, researcher and parent, as well as parent and child, during the consent process. The authors indicated that parents may feel obliged to take part in the research, and that children may also feel obliged by their parents to take part. They further suggested that with data collection within schools, children often view the researcher as a kind of teacher, and may feel they must comply with the researchers requests as is the typical relationship between adults and children within schools. I was very aware of the potential power dynamics throughout the research process, and was clear with parents and participants that there was no obligation to take part. This was detailed within the parent and child information sheet, and was expressed by myself at every stage of the research, including the final interview. I also gained consent from parents and participants separately, to reduce the potential for parental influence over my participant's decision.

The dilemma of children viewing the researcher as someone they must comply with is complex, and in accordance with the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2014), I aimed to confront this through considering both verbal and non-verbal signs of any reluctance to consent, or discomfort through the research process. Since participants may share difficult playtime experiences during the interview, I used 'process consent' throughout the interview, by reminding them of their right to stop the interview at any time, or to not answer particular questions. I also ensured a named adult was available during and following any interview should participants become distressed and wish to stop.

Since part of the research involved observations during playtime while other children were present, parents of children within the school were given information related to the study.

This presented the challenge of balancing the importance of not highlighting a participant's diagnosis to other parents within the school, alongside the wish to inform parents and children of the research activity taking place. As such, parents were provided information about research occurring within the school, and that the study was exploring children's experiences during playtime. This included details of what the researcher would do during observations (take notes of what they saw and heard), and also explaining that the research was not about their child in particular, and that no identifying information would be taken or kept about their child (see Appendix 8). The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2014) states:

“there is a difference between withholding some of the details [...] and deliberately falsely informing the participants of the purpose of the research” (BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2014, p. 24).

The Code of Human Research Ethics (2014) also maintained that the anonymity of participants should be ensured within research, and that careful consideration should be given to research methods, to ensure no harm is done to through research participation. In this case, all parents within the participants class were given all other information related to the study, and the option of contacting myself to ask questions should they wish to. As their child was not participating in the research and might only be observed by proxy, this appeared to be the best option to ensure no harm was caused to participants through disclosing additional information, while giving parents within the participants class the opportunity to discuss the research.

3.9.2. Anonymity and confidentiality

The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2014) states that research, particularly in-depth qualitative approaches, should aim to ensure the anonymity of participants. Using pseudonyms, altering other details that might identify participants in some way are suggested methods by which to ensure anonymity in this document.

Pseudonyms were given to all participants, as well as to the names of other people or places mentioned during the interview; participating schools were numbered to ensure their anonymity. The code also states that confidentiality must be explained and understood by participants. Both parents and participants were informed that confidentiality would need to be broken in cases where a participant disclosed something which suggested they or someone else was at risk of harm. Phelan and Kinsella (2013) suggested that when

interviewing children, developing a good rapport and ensuring their ease during the interview, can sometimes lead to their sharing information that they might not wish to be disclosed. The authors indicated the importance of researchers allowing participants to make informed disclosures during interviews. As such, I explained confidentiality to participants when gaining consent, but also reminded them immediately before the interview.

3.9.3. Teaching assistant presence during interviews

A final ethical dilemma the research posed occurred in the two cases where participants chose to have their supporting teaching assistant present with them through the interview. Ethical dilemmas may occur when known individuals are present during participant interviews. For instance, Redman-MacLaren (2014) stated that where two professionals are present during interviews, the power imbalance may be further shifted away from the participant. Haahr (2014) suggested that the presence of a known individual may also impact on the participants responses, as their interview is no longer private. The authors explained that the relationship between the known individual and the participant may bias the responses a participant gives in order to maintain that relationship, and that where this does not occur, the relationship may be impacted on negatively. This dilemma was challenging, and required me to balance the wish to ensure participants felt comfortable during the interview process, alongside the potential influence of the teaching assistant.

Given the potential for some children with autism to find social interactions difficult, and interacting with someone new anxiety provoking (Lantz, 2001), I gave participants a choice about whether they would prefer their teaching assistant with them or not. This was asked privately, to reduce the potential for participants to feel expected to agree to their teaching assistant being present. I also spoke privately to teaching assistants to ensure they were aware of confidentiality, and reminded them that I was seeking the child's views in their own words, and that their presence was only for reassurance for the child while meeting with someone relatively unknown. (See 'Limitations and issues with the study' for a further discussion of this)

3.10. Chapter summary

In this chapter I have explored the epistemological and ontological positions of the research, and how they relate to my specific research aims. I have considered my chosen methodology from a range of other similar approaches. I have then detailed the research process and individual methods, including the level to which I participated in typical playtime

activities while observing participants, following Gold's (1958) model of 'observer level of participation'. I have explored the impact of carrying out observations in relation to Braun and Clarkes (2006) phases of analysis model, before considering Yardley's (2000) quality principles in relation to qualitative research. The chapter closes with a discussion of the ethical considerations which arose through research involving children generally, and children with autism in particular.

In the following section I will outline the findings of the study. This will begin with a contextual discussion of each of the participants, and the individual themes developed for each participant in turn, followed by an exploration of the group themes generated through thematic analysis.

4. Findings Chapter

4.1. Chapter Overview

When considering the accounts each participant gave, and what was observed during their playtime, the most notable feature was how different each participant's experience appeared to be. This guided me to present the findings in an idiographic way, with Section One summarising findings from each participant at an individual level. Evidence will be provided through excerpts from transcribed talk during interviews, as well as notes from observation data for each participant in turn. All names used are pseudonyms given in order to ensure the anonymity of participants. In Section Two I will then consider themes at a group level. Since participants experiences varied, themes at a group level may have been stronger for some participants than for others. I aim to give voice to each participant's unique experience, while also considering themes at a group level.

The following section is partly based upon an essay submitted to the University of Bristol by Dunning (2018).

4.2. Section One: findings at the individual level

4.2.1. Noah

Noah was in Year Four within a large primary school situated within an urban area when the observations and interview took place. He was very forthcoming about his experiences during his interview. Noah had moved to the school the previous year from another local primary school. Noah's current school had recently adapted its playtime provision through zoning, with a different adult assigned to different parts (zones) of the school playground and field, and with different activities available in varying parts of the playground.

The function of playtime

There were a number of indications from observing and interviewing Noah that suggested that playtime fulfilled an important need for him. There appeared to be three key functions that playtime served. First, it provided Noah with some important time away from the classroom in which he could reflect on his day, remind himself about things that he might otherwise forget, and reinforce his learning. As Noah commented:

'Like with my colour blindness, like I know what all the colours are but [...] I'm still trying to learn what they are. So that's what I did yesterday I sat on the wall and trying to learn what the colours are'.

Such 'processing time' appeared to be important to Noah and was apparent in observations, where I noticed Noah sitting quietly by himself appearing to observe the playground, or otherwise seeming lost in thought.

The second key function that playtime appeared to have for Noah was to provide him with a break from academic work, and the stresses of the classroom. He stated *'...it's a good thing to calm down after maths'* when referring to playtime, and commented being glad to be outside following maths lessons.

The third function that playtime seemed to have for Noah was the chance to have fun at school. During the interview with Noah he regularly highlighted the importance of fun at playtime, stating *'its very fun here'*.

Moving in and out of social engagement

Noah engaged in many peer interactions at playtime, at times appearing involved, engaged, responsive and sociable. At other times, Noah appeared unsure how to respond to peers' attempts to interact with him, or flitted between playing with others and being by himself.

When interacting with others, I noticed times when Noah was involved in the play of familiar peers, and initiated interactions with them. An excerpt from observation notes records:

Noah runs towards a shaded area with three trees by the perimeter fence. He joins a group of boys who are pushing and pulling each other and laughing. Noah pulls one boy into a nearby hedgerow where some other children are playing, and they laugh together. Noah sits with four other boys in the shaded area and listens as two of the boys talk about another area being the prison and this area being the den.

(Excerpt from Observation notes 1)

On this occasion, Noah appeared to be fully engaged in play with his peers, but he commented that he also sometimes played with his peers even though a game might make 'no sense' or have 'no point' to him.

While observing Noah for a longer period on the school playground, it became more apparent that these interactions could be socially skilful, but often brief. The observation notes record:

Noah runs back to the boys now. [...] they count together as though playing hide and seek [...] Noah back by himself now [...] Noah returns to the group [...] Walks away from the group now and begins walking with a younger girl [...] returns to the group of boys who are running and hiding, and then wanders off again.

(Excerpt from Observation notes 2)

Despite being able to engage himself within physical play like running, hiding or walking together with peers, interviewing Noah suggested he sometimes felt unsure how to respond to peers' attempts to engage him in conversation.

Noah: I have a teddy called Albert and he's [another boy] quite interested in him [...] So he just comes up to me and, I just, and he just says 'hi how's Albert?'.

Researcher: Ok

Noah: And I'm like errr [laughs]

A focus on physical activities over social interactions

Observing and interviewing Noah both indicated that he appeared to be more concerned with what he was doing at playtime, rather than who he was doing it with. This could be partly seen where Noah appeared content to play by himself. The observation notes record:

Noah stands on the trim trail⁹ and hops from one wooden post to the next. There are several groups of children playing nearby. Noah walks past them without any interaction. This involves at one point navigating around a girl to get to the next part of the trail, without comment.

(Excerpt from Observation notes 2)

Noah also indicated that he was primarily concerned with physical aspects of the school playground. For instance, he talked about various things he liked to do at playtime, such as 'playing on trim trails' and when asked what would improve his playtimes, Noah commented on physical activities such as 'climbing stuff...I love climbing frames', fairground type games such as the 'catch a ducky game', and quieter activities such as computing.

Potential Difficulties

There were a number of indications from observing and interviewing Noah that he may have experienced some difficulties at playtime, ranging from keeping himself occupied, to difficulties with social experiences and busy times within the school year.

Noah talked about his uncertainty when finding activities to engage himself in at playtimes.

Noah: Like yesterday erm he, I got a bit stuck of what to try to do and he [a peer from his class] said 'why don't you just play Simon Says'

This was apparent while observing Noah, where on one occasion he changed his mind several times about whether to play on the school field, stating 'what am I going to do?' to himself and wandering back and forth along the perimeter of the field. It appeared that with less focus on social interactions during playtime, Noah sometimes struggled to fill the time effectively, but attempted to do so through games he might play.

Noah indicated that busy periods of the school year such as 'move up morning'¹⁰ impacted on his playtime experiences, and his capacity to cope.

⁹ Trim Trial: an assault course with ramps, stepping stones, and other physical apparatus provided in many primary school playgrounds for children to play on.

¹⁰ Where children visit their class and teacher for the following school year.

During his interview Noah commented on experiences in his prior school which he had found difficult. Noah described how adults supported him at playtime in his previous school, which he appeared to find difficult in two ways. On the one hand Noah talked about not liking being followed by an assigned one-to-one teaching assistant and wanting space from the adults. He stated:

Noah: [...] at my other school you could not do what you want coz the teacher was following you everywhere. Like when everyone was up on the climbing frame, and then I'd go, and then go to the other climbing frame, and like they were following me. So like at this school you have more freedom [...]

Noah also commented on the peers being unkind to him at playtime in his previous school, stating '*somebody called me silly*' and '*he squeezed my arm*'. Despite this, Noah appeared to focus more on the problem he had with his teachers '*not seeming to care*' about this, and not providing the support he wished for.

4.2.2. Logan

Logan was in Year One of a small primary school situated within an urban area. Unlike the other five participants, Logan was struggling to access both the social and academic aspects of the mainstream primary school he was currently in. He spent almost all of his time at school with an attached one-to-one teaching assistant, and most of their time was spent within a hallway near the Reception classroom. Logan spent most playtimes indoors with his teaching assistant; sometimes he went out with one to one support; and occasionally he joined the Reception class children in their outdoor area. During his interview, Logan was provided with visual aids as well as drawing and sorting activities to support the conversation.

Isolation

The most notable feature of Logan's playtime experience was that of his isolation from his class and from the other children within school. During his interview he stated '*I no go out mostly*'. Observing and interviewing Logan suggested two key reasons for his isolation from playtime in particular. Firstly, Logan played and interacted in a rough manner which could potentially pose a risk to his peers. As the observation notes record:

Logan approaches me and pushes his block into the side of my face apparently to show it to me.

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

During the same observation Logan had been in the Reception play area and the other children had been taken to play elsewhere due to concerns of their safety when Logan began swinging a rake back and forth and hitting other objects with it.

Secondly, Logan's isolation appeared to be related to his own reluctance to join peers on the playground. On one occasion Logan pretended the door to the playground was locked when asked to come outside.

The teaching assistant says "I can see the other children heading towards the field." Logan remains fixed on the door but this time replies 'Oh my goodness! I need to break this lock!' He wiggles the paperclip in the door again.

(Excerpt from observation notes 1)

Logan's appearance suggested he was relaxed and comfortable, but his activity with the lock pick suggested he was reluctant to go outside. Logan also appeared to use the lock pick activity to absolve himself of responsibility for this refusal to comply with the adult's suggestion. Logan's reluctance to go outside was more apparent later when he finally agreed to open the door go outside, but then looked out at the playground and commented:

'I don't feel very well. I think I have a disease'.

During play, Logan appeared content in his own company; playing with various objects and talking to himself without attempting to interact with myself or his teaching assistant for long periods of time. When asked to imagine what would happen in the best playtime in the world, Logan commented:

I'd just ride [my bike] on my own and run around in circles.

Perhaps due to Logan's isolation from peer interactions, I noticed times when his teaching assistant appeared to try and engage him in conversation, interactive play and to reinforce learning through play.

Logan smashes a toy tree with a block inside the stage. 'Oh dear, the trees had an accident' the teaching assistant says. Logan gets a plastic meter roller, and the teaching assistant says 'Can you count the meters?' Logan says 'how long is a meter?' as he rolls the meter stick along the floor.

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

Where does playtime begin or end?

Given that playtime only occasionally meant a change of activity, it appeared that Logan's school routine was largely unaffected by it, and that playtime was primarily marked by the ringing of the school bell. Logan showed little awareness of when playtime began or ended, which was apparent when I told Logan I would come and help him tidy up once I had finished observing him at playtime.

Logan says 'Is playtime finished?' [a few minutes pass] Logan says 'is playtime finished?' 'Not yet, three more minutes' says his teaching assistant.

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

The lack of distinction between playtime and any other part of his school experience was also indicated during his interview.

Researcher: [...] shall we think about what happened yesterday at playtime?

Logan: Mmhmm, I had to stay here for another four hours.

Researcher: Another four hours [laughs]

Logan: I just stay here for all those hours, so I can just learn stuff.

The potential for being hurt by peers

When interviewing Logan I showed him some drawings of playtime scenes, and he talked about the potential for others to hurt their peers at playtime.

Logan: Wait is this one trying to throw a ball at somebody?

Researcher: Is he? Is he throwing it at him or to him?

Logan: At him.

Researcher: At him. Is that something that's happened to you before Logan?

Logan: No.

Despite indicating that peers may hurt one another in the playground, Logan suggested that this was not something he himself had experienced. Logan nonetheless indicated feeling there was the potential to be hurt by peers at playtime. It was unclear the extent to which Logan's reluctance to enter the playground at playtime could be related him feeling that peers may hurt him.

4.2.3. Alex

Alex was in Year Four within a large primary school situated within an urban area. He described his experiences well during the interview. Alex had a one to one teaching assistant assigned to him during all breaktimes in school. The only exception to this was on Friday lunchtimes, where Alex spent his playtime indoors with a peer of his choosing. Alex chose to have his teaching assistant present with him during the interview.

Enjoying being part of a group

During my observations Alex spent the duration of his playtimes playing and interacting with a familiar group of boys. While outside he played with a larger group, and within his classroom I observed him play with two boys from the same group. Alex appeared central to the group's activities during playtime, and also suggested during his interview that being with others was an important aspect of his playtime experience and that for this reason playtime was a positive experience for him. He stated:

'I like going where everyone else is'

Alex often stated that playing with others was something which made playtime fun. He described playtime as a positive experience in which he and his friends had fun together in various games.

Alex also appeared keen to remain part of the group's activities outside, and remained in close proximity of them at all times. At times this meant Alex followed the lead of his peers in play:

'He's down there' says one of the boys. 'Yeah get him' says another, and they run towards him. Alex copies this and runs.

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

Assertiveness in play

Although at times Alex followed the play of others, there were indications that Alex most often led the play of his peers, and that he preferred to do so. Alex appeared to lead his peers by suggesting a new course of action in a game, as the following observation excerpt suggested:

Alex says, 'Who wants to follow me to the grave?!' and points his pole towards another peer's face, [Alex says] 'get him!' and the three boys chase the fourth boy to the previous hedge.

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

Just as Alex offered suggestions for his peers during play, so too did he instruct their behaviour more directly:

Alex looks at his peer who picks up a stick and says 'put that down!' and the boy drops the stick and leaves it on the floor.

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

I noticed no instances during my observations where Alex's assertiveness with his peers appeared to be a problem, with his peers following Alex's direction in every case.

Alex also talked about his peer's tendency to follow his lead in play:

Alex: [...] they usually follow me [...] I feel like I'm in charge but I'm not really. But I feel like I am.

Interviewer: [...] Do you prefer that?

Alex: Yeah

Seeking and resisting support

There were indications through observing and interviewing Alex that he both sought the support of his teaching assistant during playtime, but also felt uncomfortable by being watched by him. Alex and his peers often chose secluded areas to play in while outside, and Alex described himself as feeling 'stalked' by his teaching assistant at playtimes. As Alex commented:

Alex: [...] I would just prefer it if there was less watching. [...] I would feel a bit better cus I don't know what they're watching me for, and I don't know why they're watching me (...) and its weird it's like they're stalking me or something. [...] and I have no idea why you're watching me [directed to TA].

TA: Would you like me to explain sometime?

Alex: Yes.

TA: OK.

Alex: Coz you're a stalker.

Alex implied here that part of his difficulty with the experience of having an adult watch him at playtime was related to feeling uninformed as to the reason of this intervention. Despite this, Alex later stated that he felt the reason was likely to be ‘*so I’d be sensible*’ and ‘*to look after me*’. Alex nonetheless indicated feeling uncomfortable with being watched. At times however, I noticed Alex sought support of his teaching assistant. As the observation notes record:

[...] Alex quickly asks his teaching assistant if it is OK to throw his apple core in the hedges. His teaching assistant agrees to this, and Alex throws his apple away, before running and shouting ‘catch me’ to the boy who is ‘it’.

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

Although Alex talked about finding the experience of being watched in his play difficult, on this occasion he appeared to seek guidance from his teaching assistant.

4.2.4. Sam

Sam was in Year Five within a medium sized primary school situated within an urban area. Sam had an assigned teaching assistant during many of his lessons, as well as outdoors during morning playtime, but not lunchtime break. Sam struggled to explain himself during the interview at times, and drawings/Lego building activities were provided to support the conversation.

‘I get so annoyed’

There were a number of indications from observing and interviewing Sam that he found the behaviour of peers at playtime difficult. Sam indicated that he frequently became frustrated with the behaviour of peers at playtime, stating ‘*I get so annoyed*’. Sam’s annoyance appeared related to times where his peer’s hurt him, played roughly with each other, and/or did not follow closely the rules of the playground.

For instance, Sam’s peers occasionally appeared to tease him, and I noticed he responded to his peer’s behaviour with anger and frustration at times. Sam expressed his annoyance at these incidents during his interview.

Sam: Well, that was today, and I wanted the bat Adam was holding and I said ‘please give me the bat’ and he, I think he said ‘OK’, and then he refused for me to get it.

Researcher: He refused to give you it, and how did you feel?

Sam: Really sad and annoyed. If someone wouldn't give me something I really want, that gets me so annoyed and upset (...)

Sam talked about times when peers had hurt him as being not fitting with behavioural expectations; stating 'a friend can't do that!' and 'he wasn't supposed to hurt me'. There were also indications that Sam took action when his peer's behaviour did not match his expectations. On one occasion I noticed Sam approach two girls swinging on a climbing frame, and appear to tell them off for being too rough. Sam also stated during his interview:

I kind of, tell them off [...] they might be hurting each other [...] they might be playing a wrestling game.

Secondly, Sam appeared frustrated when peers did not follow rules relating to playground resources. On one occasion he seemed frustrated when children used toys from a toy trolley when they were not supposed to. As the observation notes record:

Sam says "its not their turn!" Another boy approaches to take a bat and again Sam instructs them to leave as it is Year Five's day to use the items from the trolley. [...] He yells "GGGGRRRR! IT'S YEAR Five's DAY!"

(Excerpt from observation notes 1)

Just as Sam became frustrated when peers did not follow the rules regarding the toy trolley, Sam himself adhered closely to his own expectations, indicating the importance of these rules to his playtime experience. After spending several minutes attempting to stop a Year Four boy from using a ball from the toy trolley, the observation notes record:

Finally one of the boys he is chasing accidentally drops the ball and Sam picks it up. He clutches onto it really tightly for a moment and looks relieved. A nearby boy asks Sam if he can have a go with the ball, and Sam hands it straight over to him. Sam's teaching assistant approaches me now as I look over to her in surprise that he has given up the ball. She laughs and says "well he's allowed to have it because he's a Year Five"

(Excerpt from observation notes 1)

Brief interactions and solitary play

Sam's play appeared to be largely solitary during playtime. He often played by himself, and talked to himself as he walked across the playground. His interactions with others were usually brief, and appeared to range from functionally playing structured activities (such as

playing bat and ball with another) while occupied with his own personal play narrative, to being more sociable and responsive to others at times.

When playing by himself, Sam appeared busy and content in his own company. The observation notes record:

Sam appears engrossed in a game by himself. He runs up and down the perimeter fence at the back of the busy courtyard, pushing the fence at times, and appearing to pretend he is holding something and pressing buttons. Sam runs past me and touches the basketball hoop and then the perimeter fence. 'Just testing some inventions', he says to me. He then walks away saying 'that's the rocket launcher' apparently to himself.

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

There were times where Sam played functionally with others, but appeared distant and involved in his own personal narrative. The observation notes record:

The girl stands and waits as Sam dramatically prepares his hit of the ball. He talks to himself about being a superhero and being about to fire the ball forwards. The girl looks at Sam and smiles. Sam does not appear to acknowledge her. "huyaaaaa!" he says as he hits it towards her and returns to his superhero stance.

(Excerpt from observation notes 1)

Sam appeared to have poor skills in socially reciprocal play, but was nonetheless able to engage in an interaction with this peer on this occasion.

During his interview Sam also commented on enjoying playing with others during playtime, and stated that playing with his teaching assistant in particular was something he enjoyed. Sam stated:

[...] my helper, Mrs Smith, but you can call her Jackie [...] there's one game I like to play with her, and that's shadows. [...]

At times Sam appeared to seek social interactions with peers which were more engaged, though these were often brief. The observation notes record:

Sam runs towards a large group of Year Five boys, and hugs one of them, before running away again [...]

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

When engaged in more socially interactive play with his peers, Sam also appeared to end these interactions unceremoniously at times, and appeared unconcerned with remaining with particular peers for long periods. The observation notes record:

'Look at this' says the boy, and [Sam and his peer] then begin hitting a small bush and making funny noises as they do [...] A few more boys standing close by join the two in flicking the grass with sticks. The boys then walk away, and Sam begins to follow them but then walks in the opposite direction. The first boy he [was] playing with notices this and looks back at him, but Sam has left.

Excerpt from observation notes 2)

4.2.5. Morgan

Morgan was in Year Five within a medium sized primary school situated within an urban area. He described his experiences well during the interview. Morgan's school playground included a medium sized courtyard on one side of the school, with a medium sized field on the other side, with an open courtyard and climbing frame which joined the two areas.

The function of playtime

There were numerous indications from observing and interviewing Morgan that playtime served two key functions. Firstly, playtime appeared to be a time within the school day in which he was able to socialise with peers, and catch up with those he was familiar with. When describing what playtime was like when coming back to school from the weekend Morgan stated:

everybody's playing with each other [...] like everyone will be happy, chattin', and all tha'.

On both occasions that I observed Morgan at playtime, he made use of this opportunity to socialise with peers for the duration of playtime: talking, playing structured games and playing chasing games with various peers throughout each observation.

The second important function playtime appeared to serve Morgan was the opportunity to be able to move around more freely and actively than during the rest of his school day. Morgan stated *'I sometimes get bored when people are speaking to me'*, and reported enjoying *'running around'* at playtime and *'being active'*. Morgan stated that he would rarely speak with teachers at playtime, indicating further his preference for physically active play over conversations.

Skilled social operator

Morgan's sociability during playtime meant that he spent the entirety of playtimes interacting and playing with peers. Both observing and interviewing Morgan suggested that he was a skilled social operator during these times. Morgan appeared to be able to initiate interactions with other children on the playground with apparent ease. As the observation notes record:

He walks out of the shaded area and pulls the branches of a tree as he walks towards two boys playing with a frisbee. 'Can I play?' he says, and the boys agree to it.

(Excerpt from observation 2)

The ease at which Morgan involved himself in social play with peers was also suggested during his interview. He stated:

[...] I go to Alex and he's got his Frisbee and I ask 'oh can I play?' and he sez 'sure' and then, lunchtime, I have like a couple of go's and then I says 'oh can I play a bit of football' and they're like 'oh yeah sure sure sure' and then I go play with all the year 6's.

Rough and tumble play

At times, there were indications that Morgan engaged in rough play with peers at playtime. As the observation notes record:

Morgan jumps back up on the monkey bars, and a younger girl is playing on them as well. 'Come on get off' he says as he pulls the girl off them and she falls hard to the floor, but laughs. Morgan jumps down to her and says 'What year are you? The girl says 'Year Four'. They smile at each other and both climb back up the monkey bars. Morgan pushes her off again, saying 'outta the way' and again she laughs. This time he jumps down right next to her and begins to shove her into the floor. The girl giggles as Morgan pushes her into the floor, saying 'put your hands behind your back!' His play appears very rough.

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

On this occasion Morgan and his peer appeared to be enjoying rough and tumble play together, but this did not always appear to be understood by the adults on the playground. As the observation notes record:

A nearby dinner lady approaches looking concerned, and says to the girl 'Are you happy with that game?' Morgan and the girl pause, look at the dinner lady and stop

smiling. The girl looks confused. 'Uhh...yeah' she says as though this is obvious. The dinner lady says 'OK' and walks away.

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

Altercations

During his interview Morgan indicated that playtime could sometimes be a time where altercations with peers might happen, and that given the reduced contact with adults, difficult situations could arise for him, in which adults were unaware of the true circumstances of a dispute. As Morgan commented:

I was trying to play a game and then he shoved me and then he tried to make a, mimic a stupid voice, and he was saying what I was saying. It was getting a bit annoying, and then I called him a name, and then when I told one of the midday supervisors, he just said I called him two words that were [...] really bad. But I didn't call him that. So he tried to get me in trouble.

4.2.6. Liam

Liam was in Year Six within a medium sized primary school situated within an urban area. He articulated his ideas well during his interview, showing insight into both his playtime experience, as well as himself.

Processing time

Observing and interviewing Liam suggested that playtime provided him with valuable time to reflect on and process various things. This 'processing time' appeared to provide Liam with the opportunity to reflect on life events. As Liam stated:

Researcher: are there any other things that you think at playtime?

Liam: Home

Researcher: You think about home.

Liam: My granny that died.

While observing Liam, I noticed times where he would approach one girl in particular, and sit quietly with her for several minutes before returning to various games and activities on the playground.

Interacting through structured games

Observing and interviewing Liam suggested that he spent most of his playtimes engaging with peers in structured team sports such as cricket or football. These games, on the one hand, appeared to allow for socially reciprocal play between Liam and his peers, but at times these games also appeared to lead to difficulties for Liam.

The structured team sports Liam engaged in at playtime appeared to provide him with a way of interacting and bonding with his teammates over the same purpose; celebrating victories, and lamenting with peers when goals were scored by the opposing team. As the observation notes record:

A boy stands ten metres in front of Liam and appears to do a victory dance as their team scores a goal. He looks at Liam, wiggles his bottom and swings his arms from side to side. Liam copies these actions, and together both boys move in sync with each other, smiling.

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

At times however Liam appeared to find the way peers played these games to be problem. When approaching me during my second observation, Liam complained about his peers not following the rules within a game of football.

'A bit of a war ground'

There were indications from interviewing and observing Liam that he found playtime difficult at times; describing the playground as 'a bit of a war ground'. There appeared to be two ways in which Liam found playtime difficult, and he reported various ways he had of dealing with these difficulties.

Firstly, Liam described playtime as a time when arguments between peers were inevitable when playing football. As Liam commented:

Erm, people say that's not a penalty, that is a penalty, that's not a penalty, and then they all argue and then we get the ball taken off of us coz we're arguing.

Liam also appeared to describe the teachers as the arbiters of the peace during football games in particular, further indicating the inevitability of conflict without adult involvement. When explaining the potential benefit of having teachers be more involved in games on the playground, Liam stated:

Like, having someone that wouldn't argue with me.[...] or having like a referee at football or something like that. [...] help us play football without getting, hitting each other.

Secondly, there were indications that Liam had been hurt by peers and called names at playtime. He stated:

I get called a girl a lot [...] they sometimes call me a granddad and stuff [...] [...] he got angry and just kicked me on the floor.

Despite the various difficulties Liam appeared to describe, observing and interviewing him suggested Liam had sought to manage some of these experiences. For instance, Liam indicated that being the goalie during a game of football reduced his potential to become involved in arguments with peers. He stated:

[...] that's how lots of arguments happen. [...] Unless I'm in goal and then I get left alone a bit.

4.3. Section One concluding comments

In sum, a range of experiences and views were expressed by participants. Four of the participants indicated a range of possible functions playtime might serve, some discussed their play interests or social experiences, rules at playtime were discussed by some participants but not by others, and the extent to which individuals appeared to be having positive experiences at playtime differed. Each participant appeared unique in their personal interests, skillsets, playtime experiences, and their views about playtime. I now explore how the views and experiences of such a varied group of participants could be made sense of at a group level and consider group level themes.

4.4. Section Two: findings at a group level

Given the uniqueness of all six participants' experiences, I first considered commonalities and differences between participants by creating a table of summaries of the findings outlined above (see Appendix 15). Two things can be noticed from this table. Firstly, there was variation between participants experiences of playtime, with no two participants being completely the same. Secondly, many of the individual level findings were similar, and could be used to create group level themes. This suggested that despite differences between individuals, some shared meanings appeared to exist at a group level. The themes I developed presented themselves in varying ways for each participant; emphasising their

unique experiences in relation to playtime. Through this process three group level themes were developed:

1. The function playtime can serve
2. The challenges playtime can bring
3. Factors which may support a positive playtime experience

3.4.1. The function playtime can serve

This first theme relates to the potential for playtime to be a unique time during the school day, which appeared to serve various functions for some participants. At a group level, there appeared to be five key functions which playtime served.

Firstly, for Liam and Noah, playtime appeared to provide a valuable opportunity for reflection and processing time. Noah commented on using playtime to remind himself of his day ahead and recall key learning. Liam described thinking about important life events or the week ahead at playtime. As Liam stated:

I think about what I'm gunna do on the week. Cus sports day is next week I think, I'm not sure, lots of things are happening.

Second, there were indications from Liam and Noah that playtime provided them with the opportunity to have a break from the confines of the classroom and stresses of other aspects of school. Liam reported spending time sitting and reflecting particularly during stressful periods such as his SAT's¹¹, while Noah indicated his relief at leaving particular lessons and be outside. As Noah commented:

[...] when I'm outside I'm like 'finally I'm outside and not in that stupid maths class'

Thirdly, for Morgan and Alex playtime seemed to provide an opportunity to move around more freely. Alex stated that '*getting to run*' was one of the best aspects of playtime, whilst Morgan stated '*I like that you get to like, run around*'. There were further indications that Morgan viewed playtime as a time where everyone should be physically active. He described his ideal playtime as one where everyone was '*more active*', and expressed dissatisfaction where adults were not also active at playtime. Morgan stated:

[...] but like you know all the teachers, they just sit round talking to each other, talking to the kids, and I don't really find them that active.

Fourthly, there were suggestions from the majority of participants that playtime provided an opportunity within the school day to catch up with familiar peers both within and beyond their

¹¹ Standard Attainment Tests

own class cohort. This was indicated by each participants emphasis at times on being with familiar peers during playtime. For Morgan, playtime appeared to be a highly social affair, and he commented on being able to talk with familiar friends from both his own class, as well as the older boys in Year Six who he played football with. Sam described feeling '*great!*' when he was able to play with children from a younger year group. Liam similarly indicated that playtime was about being with familiar peers. When imagining the worst playtime in the world, he described:

[...] *you would be with people that you didn't know, as a friend*

Alex's playtimes, like Morgan's, appeared to be highly social. He talked about the importance of being with others during playtime, indicating the social function it possibly served him within school.

Finally, there were indications from Noah and Alex that playtime was a time of the school day in which the children could have fun. Alex indicated the fun and enjoyment he experienced during playtime, describing tomorrows playtime as '*Probably fun, cus it's always fun*'. Noah indicated that one of his criteria for the 'best' playtime in the world would be that it would be '*more fun, obviously*'.

3.4.2. The potential challenges playtime can bring

The second theme relates to various indications across all six participants that playtime presented the children with its own challenges as part of the school day. It is important to note that these may be best understood as *potential* challenges, and that some inference on my part was necessary to define the words of participants as indicating a challenge. Each participant's experience was unique, with the way in which potential challenges presented themselves being different for each individual. There appeared to be six ways in which playtime might pose a challenge to participants: being hurt, teased or called names; conflicts over rules; remaining occupied for the duration of playtime; finding the playground overwhelming; feeling watched by a one-to-one adult; and being isolated. These will now be discussed in turn.

Firstly, several participants indicated they had been physically hurt and teased by peers during playtime. Liam, Sam, and Morgan all described times where peers had hurt them and called them names. Liam stated '*They call me like bent and stuff*', and indicated numerous occasions where peers might say something unkind towards him. Sam's interview focused largely on the frustration he experienced as a result of peers failing to live up to behavioural

expectations, and their hurting or being unkind towards him. Sam indicated feeling that he in particular was targeted by peers at times, commenting '*some of my friends get bullied, especially me*'.

On one occasion I noticed Sam being teased by peers who took a bat from him and refused to return it. The situation quickly escalated into physical conflict between Sam and his peers. As the observation notes record:

Sam stands with his arm out apparently for the bat to be returned, but the boy holds it over his head laughing. [...] Two boys pass the bat back and forth to each other not letting Sam have it, and laughing and saying 'you can't get it'. [...] 'Uhhhh, stop!' Sam shouts, and the other boys laugh and point at him. [...] Sam goes red in the face and jumps up and runs at the boy holding the bat. The two boys grab him, one grabs him by the neck and shoves him while laughing at him. I walk over to the boys and intervene.

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

Given Sam's experiences with some children at playtime, he appeared unsure how peers might behave towards him at times. On one occasion Sam seemed concerned a peer would take a ball from him, yet she appeared to be initiating a bat and ball game with him. As the observation notes record:

A nearby girl approaches and picks up the ball after Sam hits it. Sam holds his hand out to her apparently for the ball and looks tense again. She gives it to him, and they then begin to play bat and ball together.

(Excerpt from observation notes 1)

Despite his limited access to the playground, Logan alluded to the potential for other children to be physically aggressive towards each other during playtime. When shown an image of a typical outdoor playtime, Logan pointed out what he referred to as a '*bully one*' on the playground.

For Morgan, playtime appeared to present challenges with peers which were experienced by both himself, and his friends. When asked what he might change about his playtimes, Morgan stated:

I'd change it so that there'd be like no one mean. Because there's a certain boy, [...] he hurt one of my friends, so I'd change it so that he wouldn't be so mean.

The second way in which playtime might pose a challenge, appeared to be related to the importance of rules at playtime for some participants. This related partly to difficulties encountered when the rules in structured games were changed. For instance, Alex described the frustration caused for teachers when trying to manage conflicts caused by peers '*making up their own rules*' in a game of tag, whilst Liam appeared to become frustrated himself when peers did not follow the rules of the game as he expected. As the observation notes record:

Liam catches the ball, meaning the Year Five boy should be out. The boy wants to run anyway, but Liam says 'no you're out', meaning that it would be against the rules. The teacher allows the boy to run however, and Liam looks annoyed about this but remains quiet, but whispers something [inaudible]. The boy complains to the teacher now that Liam has called him a 'wierdo'

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

On this occasion Liam appeared to place more value in closely following the rules within a structured game than those around him, with this lack of cohesion over the importance of rule causing conflicts and frustration for him.

Just as Liam seemed to value close adherence to rules within a structured game, so too did Sam appear to value close adherence to the rules of the playground more generally. Sam appeared frustrated when peers did not follow the rule relating to the use of an outdoor toy trolley only being used by one year group at a time. This seemed to be a real challenge for him at times since his peers did not appear to share his concerns, and ignored this rule frequently during my observation.

The third way in which playtime might pose a challenge to participants was indicated by Noah, who suggested that remaining occupied for the duration of playtime was difficult for him at times. He reported that he found '*trying to find games*' difficult, and I noticed times where he appeared unsure how to fill the time during playtime. This difficulty was only reported by Noah and remains unique to his account of playtimes. Noah also indicated a fourth potential challenge playtime brought him, which related to the potential for the playground to be '*a bit overwhelming*' when there were additional children on the playground (such as when children from Reception joined the rest of the school outside).

A fifth challenge at playtime which some participants alluded to related to their experiences of being supported by a one-to-one teaching assistant. While not true in every case, two participants (Noah and Alex) indicated they found the experience uncomfortable at times. Noah described his experience of having an assigned teaching assistant at playtime in his

previous school, stating *'they follow children [...] and I just found that uncomfortable'*. Alex on the other hand had an assigned teaching assistant support him at playtimes in his current school. He reported feeling *'stalked'* by his teaching assistant.

The final way in which playtime appeared to pose a challenge was indicated by observing and interviewing Logan in particular, who appeared to be isolated from peers during playtime, as well as for the rest of the school day. This appeared related to both Logan's heavy handedness when playing, as well as his reluctance to go outside with his peers at playtime. While unclear, it appeared possible that Logan experienced anxiety about some aspects of being on the school playground during playtime.

3.4.3. Factors which may support a positive playtime experience

Given the variation in participants' playstyles, interaction skills, preferences and interests, this final theme considered the common factors which appeared to support a positive¹² playtime experience. There appeared to be three main factors which influenced how positively playtime might be experienced. These were: external factors (physical landscape of the playground, and preferences related to rules), individual factors (individual coping styles, and social skills), and interpersonal factors (social relations with adults and peers). These will now be explored in turn.

3.4.3.1. External factors

Some participants talked about the physical landscape of the school playground (the availability of a range of play apparatus; the amount of space in the playground) and this appeared to be a supporting factor in having a positive experience of playtime. During their interviews, Noah, Alex, and Sam, all referred to physical aspects of the school playground. Alex suggested the need for lots of space to play in. For instance, one of his criteria for the best playtime in the world was that it occurred *'on a massive playground that's bigger than Japan'*, whilst one of his criteria for the worst playtime in the world was *'a small playground'*. Noah and Sam both talked about enjoying playing on the school trim trail at playtime, with Noah suggesting that having a range of other physical activities during playtime might further improve it. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, one challenge for Noah was finding games to play during playtime, and it appeared possible that having a larger range of games he could play by himself might improve his playtimes for this reason.

¹² What constituted a 'positive' experience was based on what appeared to be positive in my participant's views, what I understood from them, and from what I observed.

Another way in which external factors might facilitate a positive playtime experience related to the importance of clear rules for some participants. Liam and Sam's experiences illustrated the conflicts which arose when participant's own views about the importance of rules at playtime did not match with the behaviours and expectations of others. Both cases suggested this lack of cohesion created problems, and that greater cohesion between participants and their peers about the flexibility of rules, or alternatively the importance of sticking to rules at playtime, could reduce such problems. Despite this, it remained unclear whether cohesion would be best facilitated by developing participants flexibility on rules, or by supporting their peers to follow the rules more closely. I noticed one occasion where Sam's assigned teaching assistant supported him by further stating the rules of the playground to his peers. As the observation notes record:

Another boy approaches [Sam's teaching assistant] now and says "Miss, he's not sharing!" apparently referring to Sam. [Sam's teaching assistant] responds by apparently backing Sam up and saying that it's not their day to play with it.

(Excerpt from observation notes 1)

On this occasion Sam's teaching assistant appeared to enforce the rule related to the playground in order to support him, rather than encouraging Sam to be more flexible in his thinking.

3.4.3.2. Individual factors

As well as external factors, the varied nature of the participant group appeared to suggest that individual factors related to the participant's specific skillset had an impact on playtime experiences. This related to social skills, as well as the coping strategies a participant had. These will be discussed in turn.

Having social skills in order to initiate interactions with peers and manage conflicts appeared to facilitate whether some participants had a positive playtime experience, as well as their capacity to manage the range of social situations which occurred during playtime. This was indicated partly in the way Morgan skilfully managed social situations to his advantage, and the ease in which he included himself within the games and play of others at playtime. As the observation notes record:

Morgan then gently pushes another boy, who appears very angry and turns towards him, shoulders hunched, saying 'do you wanna go?' with his arms out appearing aggressive. Morgan doesn't look directly at the boy but pushes him again gently and smiles. The boy changes his expression to a smile and they briefly look at each other before walking together in sync.

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

Some participants preferred to move in and out of social interactions with others, such as Noah. Noah nonetheless appeared to have social skills which enabled him to initiate peer interactions when he wanted.

Noah: Jumping from tyre to tyre on the trim trail and making a different pose and funny face each time he lands.

Nearby girl: Watching Noah, smiling at him and laughing each time he lands.

Noah: Starts looking at the girl each time he lands and giggling with her.

(Excerpt from Observation notes 1)

Noah's capacity to initiate positive interactions with peers appeared to provide him with more opportunities to move between sociable and solitary times at playtime.

Rather differently, it was Sam's difficulty in interacting with peers tactfully which appeared to leave him vulnerable to further teasing. As the observation notes record:

Two girls are playing on the climbing frame, both swinging and trying to push each off, and bash into each other. Sam approaches them [...] he appears to be telling them off and following this they come down from the climbing frame and wander off giggling and pointing at Sam.

(Excerpt from observation notes 1)

Observing and interviewing Liam in particular suggested that having coping strategies was another individual level factor that supported a positive playtime experience. This was related to the coping strategies Liam appeared to use in order to reduce conflicts with peers during playtime. He stated that he would 'kick the floor' or 'bottle it up' when frustrated with a peer, in order to reduce conflicts. Liam also indicated that having the role of goalie during a football game was one way he had found to reduce conflicts with peers in structured games. On one occasion I noticed Liam observe a conflict between players on opposing teams following a tackle. As the observation notes record:

An altercation occurs between two boys now over the game. Liam does not get involved [...] and watches from the goal as a teacher approaches the boys apparently to resolve the issue.

(Excerpt from observation notes 2)

3.4.3.3. Interpersonal factors

Interpersonal preferences for interacting with peers and adults at playtime varied across the participant group and having a positive playtime experience appeared related the extent to which these personal preferences were accommodated for. For instance, Noah described finding playtime better when outdoor resources were free of other children playing on them. As Noah stated:

Researcher: [...] what's the first thing you'd notice that would make you realise it was gonna be a good playtime?

Noah: Not many people on the trim trail. Sometimes on the trim trail, on that wobbly bit, sometimes there's lot of people on it. Did you spot that? [...]

In this instance, Noah suggested that a good playtime experience might be one where the trim trail was free of other children, but also suggested that this is not always the case.

On the other hand, Alex related a positive playtime experience to his being with others. For instance, when asked what is was like being indoors at playtime on Friday's, Alex stated:

Fun, cus I get to bring in someone. I'm never alone in my playtime.

In this instance, Alex's experience of having a positive playtime appeared (quite differently to Noah's) related to his school accommodating his wish to be with peers at playtime by allowing him to bring a peer inside to play with him on Friday's. This appeared one factor which made Alex report his playtime experiences were positive. When asked if he would change anything to improve his playtimes Alex said '*I don't know what I'd change. I think I'm quite fine*'.

In both cases, a positive playtime experience related to having one's own individual needs and interaction preferences accommodated for, more than it did to a universal approach that would suit everyone.

The final interpersonal factor which appeared to support a positive playtime experience related to accommodating participants wishes to be either be socially engaged with and/or supported by adults, or else have time away from adults at playtime. This was indicated in the way Noah and Alex reported feeling uncomfortable with being followed by an adult at playtime. Noah also talked about the freedom he experienced without this kind of support in

his current school, saying *'its really fun here'* and *'you can basically do what you want'*. For Alex, the role of adults at playtime appeared complex, with him talking about feeling *'stalked'* by his teaching assistant and spending most of his time playing with peers, yet also appearing to seek out additional support from his teaching assistant at times.

Rather differently, Sam and Liam talked about wanting *more* time with adults at playtime. When asked about special people at playtime, Sam named his teaching assistant, and also commented *'this is my favourite day'* when talking about times when they played together. Liam (who did not have additional adult support at playtimes) talked about wanting the playtime supervisors to be more engaged with the children. He stated, *'it'd be nice if they played with us, wouldn't it?'* and also indicated that the presence of adults in games, helped to reduce conflict, suggesting they were the arbiters of the peace at playtime. He commented that when an adult was part of a game, the children could play *'without hitting each other'*. In each of the four participants mentioned, it appeared that when a participant was having difficulties with peers at playtime, they wished for more adult engagement, and when those issues were not present, participants appeared uncomfortable with additional adult presence attached to them in particular.

3.5. Chapter summary

In summary, each individual participant presented a wide range of experiences, preferences, and views about playtime. Considering the participant group as whole pointed to some commonalities. Four of the participants indicated in some way that playtime may serve a unique function as part of the school day. A range of potential challenges were alluded to, with some individuals experiencing more challenges, while others appeared to be having largely positive playtime experiences. Finally, considering the variety of views and experiences made it possible to bring together a range of factors relevant to positive aspects of their playtime experience. In the Discussion chapter I consider the three group level themes in relation to the existing literature on playtime experiences for children with autism, as well as consider the wider research on playtime for children in general.

5. Discussion Chapter

5.1. Chapter Overview

In this chapter I aim to further explore the three group level themes in relation to the existing literature on the topic of playtime for children with autism. One aspect which will be considered will be whether participant's experiences during playtime relate to being a child at playtime in general, and how much of the findings may be specific to children with autism at playtime. This is an important question, and one I wish to answer and explore before returning to the original research questions. As such, the Discussion chapter will relate the findings to the literature for playtime experiences of both children with autism and those without autism. The conclusion chapter is where I return to my research questions, which may then be considered with an understanding of what was found in relation to boys with autism at playtime specifically, and what may be related to many children's playtime experience.

In the Literature Review chapter, I highlighted that current literature on this topic is dominated by health-related research undertaken using quantitative methodological approaches, with only a few examples of children's perspectives through qualitative approaches. As I stated in the Literature Review chapter, the research evidence (including those few studies which sought the child's voice) appears largely focused on the difficulties children with autism experience at playtime, with social interaction difficulties flooding the research evidence in this area. My findings have indicated a broader picture for the experiences of boys with autism, and I aim to consider this in relation to what literature exists on this topic.

Since the research literature on children with autism can be fragmented, I will also look to the wider research evidence about children without autism at playtime. Some of the themes from this study were not present in the existing literature on playtime for children with autism, but were evident in the wider literature on playtime experiences of children in general. I will also relate the study to research about children with autism in general, and return the potential areas of need highlighted in the Introduction chapter. The final section of this chapter will consider the findings in relation to existing theory about playtime.

In the Conclusion Chapter I will return to the study's research questions, and consider the strengths and limitations of the study, future research, implications for educational psychologists, as well as providing some reflections on my own personal and professional development. I will also suggest how the findings may indicate a 'best practice model' for supporting boys with autism during playtime.

5.2. The function playtime can serve

The first broad theme appeared to indicate that playtime is a distinct time of the school day for some participants, and that it can serve a number of functions for some of these children. These appeared to be related to the potential playtime brought to socialise with others and have fun, to have a break from lessons and be active, and also to process and reflect on school and life events. I will now explore this theme in relation to the research literature.

Indications from the wider literature on playtime experiences for children without autism in primary schools suggest that playtime provides children a context in which social learning can take place (Jarvis, 2007; Mohony et al, 2017; Pellgrini and Bohn, 2005). The potential to learn new social skills was not directly stated by my participants, yet some participants (such as Morgan) did appear to have developed good social skills to manage conflicts in structured games (like football). Thomson (2007) described the playground as ‘the outdoor classroom’, where children might learn and enhanced their social skills. The author suggested that some children were often seen idly wandering or sitting without occupation, despite the potential learning which might take place at playtime. Mulryan-Kyne (2014) also suggested that children can be aimless while on the school playground. Thomson (2007) suggested school professionals could harness the social and environmental learning potential more effectively by making this a primary use of playtime for children.

Considering my own findings, such a suggestion presents a problem, since some children used playtime as chance to reflect on and process other aspects of their school day. Liam and Noah in particular appeared to benefit from having a time within their school day in which they could mentally prepare themselves for the day ahead, or make sense of their daily experiences through quiet self-reflection. The literature related to children with autism at playtime has indicated they spend more time socially isolated from peers (Kasari et al, 2011; Locke et al, 2016). This could lead one towards a negative portrayal of playtime for some children with autism, where they gain little from ‘idle’ time spent alone. My findings have suggested that at least for some children with autism, even time spent unoccupied and unengaged may serve an important function within their school day that should not be overlooked.

Calder et al (2012) found that some children with autism wished to have more sociable experiences with peers during playtime. The potential for playtime to serve a social function in which children could interact and play with peers they might otherwise not be able to was seen in the majority of my participants; Sam’s enjoyment of playing with the younger

children, and Morgan's wish to play football with the older boys stand out in particular. Playtime for some participants (especially Alex and Morgan) also appeared to be the time in the school day when talking and playing with peers was the primary purpose, and it is possible that the dissatisfaction reported by some participants in the study by Calder et al (2012) may be related to not using playtime in the ways they felt it was intended; that being to socially engage with peers.

Pearce and Bailey (2011) found that some children without autism reported having fun, being active, and staying healthy were key aspects of playtime. The potential for playtime to enable children to stay healthy was not mentioned by my participants, yet the chance to be more active and to have fun was. This could suggest that the function playtime served some participants were similar to those experienced by children without autism.

Some of my participants (Alex and Morgan) suggested playtime was a time to be outside and be more physically active, and this potential function for playtime is absent from the research literature on children with autism. This is particularly interesting given that research has found that some children with autism were less physically active than children without autism (Pan, 2008; Rosser-Standt and Frey, 2005). It is possible that despite differences in levels of physical activity between children with autism and those without, some children with autism nonetheless view this time as being an opportunity for physical activity.

Understanding children's views about the function playtime serves is useful in guiding our interpretation of the findings that they engage in less physical activity; my findings could suggest that interest or motivation in physical activity may not be the cause of the variance between their levels of physical activity.

Stephenson and Adams (2016) found that some children with autism valued the physical aspects of the school playground over socialising, while others enjoyed playing with peers. Despite this, the authors did not explore what function playtime might therefore serve children with autism as part of their school day. Within the existing literature there could therefore be the indication of a possible function of playtime, but there has rarely been direct reference to what this function might be.

Moyse and Porter (2015) suggested that although playtime presented many children with a welcome break from lessons, the opposite appeared to be true for participants in their study. They maintained that the playground could be a place of loneliness, isolation, or else a place where peers were physically or verbally aggressive, and that some participants found that lessons were in fact a welcome break from the difficulties experienced at playtimes.

However, this was not the case for Noah, who described the relief he felt at getting away

from a stressful maths class and outside onto the playground. This could suggest that some children with autism do in fact welcome the break from lessons that playtime can bring, as much as their peers without autism.

In summary, understanding the function playtime serves for children with autism is important if we intend to support them to make the best use of their playtime experience. Knowing what function playtime serves these children is also useful in our interpretation of the behaviours we see them engaging in during playtime. Despite this, there is a clear lack of evidence in the literature about the potential function playtime may serve children with autism, with no known study directly reflecting on the potential use playtime has for this group in particular. The wider research has suggested that playtime can serve a range of different functions for children in primary schools. It is therefore likely that children with autism, like those without autism, view playtime as serving various functions, and can find a range of uses for this time of the school day.

I will now consider the second theme which outlined the various challenges playtime presented some participants with.

5.3. The challenges playtime can bring

This theme related to various ways in which participants appeared to experience challenges at playtime. These were: finding games to play; feeling watched or followed by adults; experiences of physical and verbal aggression from peers, being isolated from peers, and also difficulties related to rules within team sports and the playground generally. Unlike the previous theme, there are clear parallels between these findings and the previous literature related to playtime experiences for children with autism. I will now explore this theme in relation to the literature discussed in the literature review, with some consideration to the wider literature about children without autism at playtime.

5.3.1. Negative social interactions with peers

Considering the literature on playtime experiences for children without autism in primary schools, it is clear that playtime presents various children with challenges (Mahony et al, 2017; Pearce and Bailey, 2011). The potential for arguments, and for some children to be physically hurt, called names, or teased by a small number of peers during playtime is an ongoing concern for parents and school professionals (Mahony et al, 2017; Pearce and Bailey, 2011). The majority of my participants either directly experienced, witnessed, or in

the case of Logan, imagined, incidents of being hurt, called names, or teased by peers at playtime.

Research has also suggested that some children without autism experience feelings of loneliness and isolation from others during playtime (Newman et al, 2006; Pierce and Bailey, 2011). Isolation from peers was evident when considering Logan in particular, however, Logan did not express difficult feelings associated with this. For Logan the challenge appeared more about his limited access to the activities and peer interactions which were possible at playtime, than about his feeling left out or lonely.

Similar to the research concerning playtime experiences for children generally, the literature related to children with autism also highlights the potential to be hurt, called names, or teased during playtime is a key challenge experienced by these children (Bitsika and Sharpley, 2014; Ochs et al, 2001; Sainsbury, 2009). Ochs et al (2001) suggested that when children with autism had poor social skills or physical behaviours such as 'flapping', peers would view these as direct violations of social codes, making children with autism particularly vulnerable to name calling and teasing. In my research, this appeared particularly relevant to Sam, who stood out while on the school playground as behaving differently to those around him and focused primarily in his interview on his experiences of name calling, and being hurt by his peers. Bitsika and Sharpley (2014) also indicated that perpetrators of these acts were often known to the children, which was true of Sam's experiences, with his classmates often being the children who engaged in such behaviours.

Considering the research literature which included the views of children with autism, a similar focus on experiences name calling, teasing and being hurt by some peers was apparent. Moyse and Porter (2015) interviewed girls with autism and indicated that it was only through interviewing children were the negative feelings associated with this kind of behaviour suggested. Sainsbury (2009) found that adults with Asperger's Syndrome reported that being teased or hurt by peers during playtime as children had had a long term negative emotional impact on her participants. My findings suggest that, for some children, similar difficulties occurred. Over half of my participants reported feelings of being sad as a result of name calling, or being hurt by peers. Sam and Liam both mentioned crying as something they had done as a result of being hurt by peers at playtime.

5.3.2. Other challenges at playtime

Participants in my study indicated a wide range of potential challenges experienced during playtime. For instance, Noah indicated feeling overwhelmed by the number of other children on the playground during busy times of the school year. The potential for children with

autism to experience anxiety during playtime has been suggested by Schupp et al (2013), who found that children with autism had higher cortisol levels when compared with those without autism. Nonetheless, Noah was able to link his feelings of being overwhelmed to the number of children outside at playtime. This is perhaps not surprising, since numerous studies have highlighted that some children with autism wish to play alone, and find social interactions with others difficult (Calder et al, 2012; Kasari et al, 2011; Locke et al, 2016; Moyse and Porter, 2015), yet there is no known explicit evidence of the link between a crowded playground and feelings of being overwhelmed in the existing literature.

Moyse and Porter (2015) stated that children without autism can often wish for time away from adults during playtime. The authors suggested however that some children with autism actually preferred time with adults at playtime. My findings have suggested a more complex picture. For Sam, who was experiencing challenges with peers during playtime, adults appeared to represent safe and reliable playmates who could support him with peer altercations. However, for those children who were more socially successful (such as Noah and Alex), but had a one-to-one teaching assistant at playtimes, the adult appeared to create a new challenge for children, where they expressed feeling uncomfortable, watched, and having their freedom impinged by being followed around the playground. This could suggest an interplay between the variety of potential challenges children with autism can experience at playtime, with a child's need for adult support and their experiences of peer altercations potentially being key aspects to consider in relation to one another. Exactly how adult support as an intervention is managed for children with autism, and the factors to consider when using this kind of intervention, will be considered in the next section of this chapter.

Another challenge which was indicated by two participants (Liam and Sam) related to difficulties with rules at playtime. Calder et al (2012) and Sanrattana et al (2014) both previously suggested that rules within games could pose a challenge for some children with autism. Both studies found that teachers felt a key challenge for children with autism at playtime was their difficulty with rules within team sports. Yet the specific details of this were lacking, with little evidence as to what aspects of rules were a problem for children with autism. My findings suggested that it was the flexibility of others regarding rules that posed a challenge. Sam's frustration over peers casually using a toy trolley only intended for the Year Fives, and Liam's confusion when his teacher bent the rules in order to allow a boy to run in a game of cricket even though he was caught out, both illustrated how rules were bent at times by those around these participants, and the difficulty this appeared to cause them. Thomson (2007) stated that for children without autism, rules at playtime can limit children's freedom and autonomy; having a negative impact on their playtime experience. For Sam and

Liam the inverse appeared to be the case, with rules being highly valued. Dean et al (2017) stated that since boys tend to play more team sports at playtime, they can become more overtly rejected by peers due to difficulties with the rules within team sports. My findings have suggested, at least for some children with autism, the challenge could be more about knowing when and how rules may be adapted or ignored (by both children and adults), than it is about understanding the rules pertaining to a particular game.

A final potential challenge at playtime related to Noah appearing unsure at times how to occupy himself in games. The research literature speaks very little of this potential challenge, yet Fernandes and Fernandes (2016) stated that some children with autism were less engaged in organised team sports games which are more structured by rules and clear roles. This appeared the case with Noah, who appeared to move between solitary play, and less structured social activities such as running and hiding with peers. Given Noah's difficulty in finding occupation at playtime, my findings could suggest it is possible that one consequence of some children engaging in less structured team sports could be that they can find occupying themselves during playtime more difficult. Those participants who did engage in team sports (such as Liam and Morgan) did not appear to share Noah's difficulty in finding ways to occupy themselves, and both of these participants appeared to always be able to join the game of football, since this game continued for the entire duration of playtime.

In sum, my findings suggest that some children with autism may well experience challenges with the behaviour of peers at playtime. The potential for peers to hurt, tease or call names, was apparent in the majority of participants accounts of their experiences. Previous research may have failed to consider the wider array of challenges children with autism experience at playtime. Some studies have touched on other challenges such as difficulties with rules, the potential for anxiety, and differences in how some children occupy themselves at playtime. Yet these appear to provide only general indications of difficulties, with no detail as to what in particular children find difficult, and also do little explain how this may be experienced by the children. My findings appear to suggest that beyond the tendency for boys with autism to experience difficulties with the behaviour of peers, there are a broad array of challenges that playtime may present some children. My findings also appear to add detail to the broad strokes provided by the existing literature, creating a sense of the specific ways in which challenges may be experienced. Understanding in more detail the challenges which children with autism may face at playtime, could help adults to support them in managing those challenges.

I will now consider in more detail the final theme, which outlined the various factors which may support a positive playtime experience.

5.4. Factors which may support a positive playtime experience

The final theme brought together the various elements which appeared relevant to whether children with autism had a positive playtime experience. These were related to three broad areas: the external factors (the physical context of the school playground, and the rules which governed games on the playground), individual factors (individual social skills and/or coping skills), and interpersonal factors (preferences regarding social relations with peers and adults, and whether these were accommodated for). I will now explore the three aspects which made up this theme in relation to the existing literature on playtime for children with autism. I will also touch on what the literature about playtime for children without autism says about how to support positive playtime experiences.

5.4.1. External factors

There is a growing body of research exploring what may support a positive playtime experience for primary school children (Crust et al, 2014; Factor, 2004; Newman et al, 2006; Mahony et al, 2017; Pearce and Bailey, 2011; Thomson, 2014). External factors such as the physical context of the playground and how playtime is managed by rules featured greatly here; both in the views of adults and children (Crust et al, 2014; Factor, 2004; Newman et al, 2006; Mahony et al, 2017; Pearce and Bailey, 2011). There is also some indication that external factors such as these are important for children with autism (Stephenson and Adams, 2016).

5.4.1.1. *The physical context*

Research (from both adult and child perspectives) has suggested that the provision of a wide range of play apparatus, using playground markings, and the size of the outdoor space, all impact on the quality of children's play and interactions (Newman et al, 2006; Mahony et al, 2017; Pearce and Bailey, 2011). Given the findings of my study, it could be argued that the same can be said for some children with autism, with half of my participants (Noah, Sam, and Alex) citing an improved range of physical aspects of the playground something which they would like more of at playtime. In line with this finding, Stephenson and Adams (2016) stated that some children with autism appeared to emphasise the importance of the physical

context of the school playground, over the social context playtime offered them. The authors suggested that playing on physical apparatus was a primary concern for some children with autism at playtime. This was indicated by Noah, who appeared to prefer to play alone at times, yet also found it difficult finding games to occupy himself with. My findings could suggest that one reason some children with autism may value the physical context of the school playground is *because* they prefer solitary play activities over social ones. This was true of some participants who emphasised physical aspects of the playground, but was not true of Alex, who emphasised the size of the school playground in particular. Nonetheless, it is likely that the availability of a variety of play equipment and a larger playground can have a positive impact on the playtime experiences of a variety of children with autism.

5.4.1.2. Rules governing the playground

Considering the rules which govern the playground, as well as the rules within games, the work of Thomson (2005; 2007; 2014) has suggested that some children without autism find the playground a restrictive environment in which rules dominate and constrain their freedom to play as they wish. Pearce and Bailey (2011) suggested that some children valued rules governing the school playground, indicating it was the only way to ensure peace during some games and between some children. My findings suggested that, for Liam and Sam, rules at playtime were highly important, and that issues arose for both participants where their peers did not follow the rules they were supposed to. Thomson (2007) stated that, feeling confined by rules which govern the school playground, some children seek to subvert rules when out of sight of adults. This appeared the case for Sam in particular, who expressed frustration when his peers subverted rules which he himself stuck close to.

Research has suggested that some teachers feel that children with autism find the rules within structured games difficult to understand (Calder et al, 2012; Rodriguez- Medina et al, 2018; Sanrattana et al, 2014). My findings did not indicate this. Instead what was suggested was that from their perspective, children with autism may find the lack of consistent adherence to rules during games (by both peers and adults) confusing; for example Liam's bewilderment at his teachers decision to allow a child to run during a game of cricket even though he had technically been caught out. My findings therefore indicate that what children with autism may find difficult to access during structured games on the playground, is the apparent flexibility with which some rules are used by those around them.

It is clear from this that how rules are managed at playtime is important for some children with autism, and that decisions about how to facilitate greater cohesion between flexibility or else adherence to rules needs to be considered further. Nonetheless, it remained

unanswered whether cohesion might best be achieved by stronger rule abiding at playtime by adults and peers or through developing flexibility in those children with autism who value rule abiding. Thomson (2007) argued that greater freedom of rules is essential for children without autism at playtime, but little research exists which has considered what the impact of this would be for those with autism.

5.4.2. Individual factors

Another factor which appeared relevant to the kind of experience some participants had at playtime was related to individual factors such as the social and coping skills individuals brought to the playtime situation. Social and coping skills are less apparent in the wider literature on children's' playtime experiences, but they do appear in the literature on children with autism (Bitsika and Sharpley, 2014; Oches et al, 2001; Rodrigues-Medina et al, 2018; Vincent et al, 2018). This is perhaps not surprising, since children with autism are known to have difficulties with social interaction and emotional regulation (DSM 5, 2013). I will now consider these individual factors in relation to the literature on children with autism at playtime.

5.4.2.1. Social skills

The research literature has suggested that children with autism can have poor social skills, such as difficulty initiating interactions with peers; responding appropriately to others; and being aware when peers are being unkind (Bitsika and Sharpley, 2014; Oches et al, 2001; Rodrigues-Medina et al, 2018; Vincent et al, 2018). Bitsika and Sharpley (2014) stated that this can leave children with autism vulnerable to bullying on the playground, while Oches et al (2001) stated that peers can view their behaviours as violations of social codes about what is appropriate. Sam appeared vulnerable to teasing at times, and this could be in part related to poorer social skills when engaging with peers on the playground. Logan also showed signs of having poor social skills, and this may have been one factor in his isolation from playtime, and from his peers in general. Despite this, only a minority of my participants appeared to have poor social skills which directly impacted on their playtime experiences.

Lock et al (2016) argued that many children with autism were in fact able to initiate and respond to peers appropriately during playtime. If having poor social skills can create difficulties at playtime, then having good social skills may well support a positive playtime experience. This appeared to be confirmed by my findings, with Morgan being highly skilled in engaging himself in the play of his peers, and managing conflict on the playground. It

seemed that for Morgan, good social skills enabled him to be more socially successful and interactive at playtime. Yet this was not entirely true for Noah, who appeared to have good social skills but remained by himself at times. Nonetheless, Noah appeared to move in and out of social interactions with the same ease at which Morgan remained within them.

Previous research has provided little detail as to how better social skills may enable children to manage well at playtime. In both cases, it could be suggested that having good social skills allows children with autism to manage the social context of playtime, and have more freedom as to how and when they engage with their peers. The exact nature of how children then interact with peers could nonetheless be dependant on other factors such as their social interaction and play preferences.

5.4.2.2. Coping skills

The research literature has suggested that some children with autism have ineffective coping skills to deal with their playtime experiences (Bitsika and Sharpley, 2014; Moyse and Porter, 2015). Bitsika and Sharpley (2014) stated that children with autism who experienced negative social interactions at playtime found this difficult to manage. Moyse and Porter (2015) found that one participant responded to experiences of feeling lonely by removing herself from social interactions with peers at playtime entirely. My findings indicated where having coping skills came in useful, rather than where failing to have them created difficulties. Liam in particular highlighted various strategies he had found useful at playtime. These included the role he took in team sports (such as being the goalie) and ways in which he managed feelings, in order to reduce his involvement in peer altercations at playtime. My findings therefore appear to offer new insight into how things can work in relation to coping skills, rather than only considering how a lack of coping skills can lead to problems.

For further information about the potential benefits of social skills and coping strategies interventions for children with autism, please see Koegal et al (2011), who provided the most recent systematic review of the intervention literature.

5.4.3. Interpersonal factors

The final factor which appeared relevant to participant's positive experiences of playtime was related to their preferences regarding social relations with adults and other children, and the extent to which these were understood and accommodated for. I will now consider these factors in relation to the wider literature on children's playtime experience, as well as

research related to children with autism at playtime. I will first consider social relations with peers and interaction preferences, before exploring the role of adults for children with autism at playtime.

5.4.3.1. Varied peer interaction preferences

Research which has explored the view of children without autism has considered the varied nature of their peer interaction preferences (Newman et al, 2006; Pearce and Bailey, 2011). Pearce and Bailey (2011) maintained that playtime is a highly sociable time for children without autism. Newman et al (2006) differed however, suggesting that social preferences for all children vary greatly, and that some children enjoy solitary play. Considering the literature related to children with autism at playtime from the perspective of adults, research suggests that they are less engaged in social interactions than other children generally; but that variation exists (Ingram et al, 2007; Kasari et al, 2011; Locke et al, 2016). However, it is only when gaining the perspectives of children with autism that this variation is made sense of, with research suggesting that some children actually prefer time playing alone (Calder et al, 2012; Moyse and Porter, 2015; Stephenson and Adams, 2016). Calder et al (2012) highlighted that some children with autism wish to play by themselves, while others want to be more sociable at playtime. Across the six participants in my study, no two children engaged in the social aspects of playtime the same. There were some participants (such as Logan and Sam) who spent a considerable amount of time playing alone. There were also some children whose playtimes were highly sociable (Morgan and Alex). And there were those who appeared somewhere between the two (Noah and Liam).

Importantly, it appeared in my research that when participants individual preferences for solitary or sociable play with peers was accommodated for, they had more positive playtime experiences. Alex stated his playtimes were 'fine', and this in part appeared related to being part of a social group when outside, and being able to bring someone from the same group inside to play on Friday's. Noah wanted more time playing with play apparatus unoccupied by peers, and expressed his frustration that this was not always possible at playtime. The potential benefits of accommodating for individual social preferences was not directly stated in the literature on children with autism. Calder et al (2012) did suggest that children (with autism) who wish to play alone but are supported to interact, found this kind of support frustrating. Despite this, the authors did not develop a model by which children of varying social preferences might be supported during playtime. The previous research literature has therefore only gone so far in developing a sense of varied social preferences for children with autism at playtime. My research appears to suggest that social preferences will vary

across boys with autism, and it is likely that very different strategies will be needed to support any two boys with autism during playtime.

5.4.3.2. Adults at playtime

Another interpersonal factor which appeared important to participant's playtime experiences related to the role adults took as part of their playtime. Research exploring children's views of adults at playtime has suggested that they find adults are often preoccupied with rule setting (Knowles et al, 2013; Thomson, 2007; 2014). Thomson (2007; 2014) maintained that children can find this limiting, and will seek time away from adults while on the playground to assert their own autonomy and freedom over this space.

Kasari et al (2011) explained that one common intervention schools use to support children with autism, is to provide an adult aide during playtime. The authors indicated that the purpose of this aide is typically to support children with autism to be more socially engaged with their peers, to understand social situations in real time on the playground, and support behaviour incidents. Despite this tendency, there is limited research which has explored the views of children with autism about their supporting adult at playtime.

Similar to the varied social preferences related to interacting with peers, my findings have suggested that children's experience of having a supporting adult with them during playtime can vary greatly. For children such as Noah and Alex who appeared to be having positive social interactions with their peers, having an adult with them on the playground appeared to be an uncomfortable experience which limited their experience of autonomy at playtime. This was perhaps alluded to by Calder et al (2012), who found that children could become frustrated by adults supporting their peer interactions. Yet there is no evidence in the research related to children with autism that they, like children without autism, can find adults limit their autonomy on the playground. Given that an assigned adult aide is a common strategy for supporting children with autism at playtime, it is possible that children with autism are particularly vulnerable to having their autonomy limited by adults at playtime. Alex highlighted not knowing why he had a supporting adult, and wanting further information about why this intervention had been provided. How children are informed about playtime support and their experiences of that support remains absent from the research literature.

Sam appeared to highly value and seek out time with his supporting adult at playtime; and appeared to struggle with peers being unkind towards him at times where this adult was not present. Vincent et al (2018) found that, despite the possibility for supporting adults to help children with autism interact with peers more at playtime, teachers reported that some

children (with autism) actually chose to play with the supporting adult instead. Yet there is little evidence as to why some children with autism might prefer adult contact during playtime. Kasari et al (2011) highlighted however, that beyond the potential to facilitate peer interactions, supporting adults were also able to help children with autism manage conflicts with peers. For Sam the key benefit of having a one-to-one adult at playtime appeared related to reducing difficult interactions with peers. He appeared to value a responsive and patient play partner at playtime. Liam also expressed he would like it if adults were more involved in games with the children, and this also seemed related to difficulties with peer interactions. It appeared that the role that some boys with autism wished adults to take at playtime was dependent upon their experiences with their peers, and that one reason some boys with autism gravitate more towards adults at playtime, could be related to challenges experienced during social interactions with peers. Although previous research has suggested that adults may help children with autism who experience negative social interactions with peers, my findings appear to suggest that there is an *interplay* between these two features. My findings have therefore provided further information about the conditions in which a supporting adult may be a positive or negative thing for boys with autism, based on other interpersonal aspects of their playtime experiences.

5.5. Theory of Mind

In the Introduction chapter I highlighted a number of potential challenges children with autism may face at playtime, such as the impact of having difficulties with understanding social situations. Within the Literature chapter I highlighted where these potential challenges were confirmed, and where they appeared absent. A discussion of Theory of Mind in relation to the playtime experiences of children with autism was not apparent within the research literature, and as such, I will now reflect on ToM in relation to the findings.

In relation to my own findings, it appeared that some participants were able to make sense of social situations and respond to them better than others. Liam for instance had developed good strategies for avoiding conflicts with peers during football, by taking the role of goalie. Meanwhile Sam struggled to make sense of his peers' behaviour, and found their behaviour frustrating, and not in line with behavioural expectations. Interestingly though, even those individual's who appeared to manage well at playtime, Liam included, showed some difficulties in making sense of the social situations which occurred. For instance, Liam found times when rules were adapted by those around him difficult to understand, and appeared unable to make sense of these situations or infer the perspectives of others. As mentioned, Noah also described himself engaging in games which he did not entirely understand the purpose of. Noah and Liam's experiences could be taken to indicate that ToM is a key skill in

understanding and engaging in playtime for boys with autism, but that there are also ways around this. Liam appeared to have found ways to manage the potential conflicts he had experienced through taking on different roles in games. While Noah appeared to 'go along with' games, possibly accepting that this something that was done, although he did not understand why. In sum, ToM may be a useful skill at playtime for children to make sense of social situations as they occur. Nonetheless, some participants appeared to find alternative ways of managing any apparent difficulties in understanding social situations at playtime. Considering once more the Neurodiversity perspective of autism, this could suggest that ToM is just one way children may dissect playtime events, and that some children with autism may be able to compensate for this difficulty, manage well at playtime, and enjoy their playtime experience.

Having considered this study's findings in relation to the literature, I will now explore how the findings may relate to existing theory about playtime.

5.6. Theoretical considerations

In the Introduction chapter, I explored the key theoretical understandings of playtime, and the potential for playtime to be an important aspect of children's social, cognitive and academic development (Pellegrini and Davies, 1993; Smith, 1994). I also outlined two views for understanding playtime: the romantic view (in which enjoyment and the positive potential of playtime is emphasised); and the problematic view (in which the potential problems playtime can cause are emphasised in relation to behaviour difficulties) (Blatchford and Sharp, 1994).

Considering my findings, whether playtime allowed for social skills to develop further for my participants was not possible to explore due to the lack longevity of the data collection period. However, playtime appeared to be a time where social interactions were common for some participants, and the potential importance of social interaction skills¹³ at playtime has been highlighted. Some participants playtimes did not appear to focus exclusively on social interactions, and it is possible that theoretical conceptualisations of playtime are based on children generally, and may lack more nuanced aspects of playtime, such as the experiences of children with autism.

¹³ Such as being able to initiate an interaction with a peer or adult

Playtime experiences varied across participants, meaning that for some challenges were highlighted, whereas others focused more on positive aspects. Yet those participants who expressed difficulties with peers at playtime, also reported the joy they experienced. As such, the study could be taken to suggest the dichotomy between the romantic and the problematic views of playtime may be over simplistic. This was indicated by Pearce and Bailey (2011), who stated that the romantic view of playtime can also take into account problems related to playtime, but that generally playtime may be viewed as an important aspect of the school day.

A key finding of this study has been that playtime can serve a unique function for some participants. The study has suggested that alongside socialising, being active, and having fun, some participants used playtime to process and reflect on aspects of their school day, and life events beyond school (such as Liam who reported thinking about his grandmother passing away). In this sense playtime may serve as both a mental break from academic learning, a time to digest key learning, but also a time to make sense of one's life beyond school. Importantly, Liam's use of playtime was not solely about play. As such, one question could be whether 'playtime' might be the best term to describe this time of the school day.

A final consideration relates to the potential for the playground to provide children with a unique opportunity to interact and play with less adult involvement than usual. Blatchford and Sharp (1994) argued that time away from adults was an important aspect of the playground, since it was a key site in which children could engage in their own 'culture' (Opie, 1993, p. vii-ix). Participants in my study could be seen as divided in this respect, with some participants (Noah and Alex) wanting time away from adults, which could be related to their wish to engage in this 'child's culture'. Yet other participants appeared to want *more* time with adults (Liam and Sam). The study might therefore pose the questions about the extent to which all children *want* to participate in activities away from adults, in this, 'children's culture'.

5.7. Chapter summary

In sum, the factors which support boys with autism at playtime appeared to be related to external factors, individual skills the child had, and interpersonal preferences. Supporting boys with autism at playtime in primary schools is a highly individualised and complex affair, with no universal approach being possible. In some ways, knowing what supports all children at playtime can help us know how to support children with autism. In other ways, children with autism have very unique experiences of this context. The research literature to date on

children with autism at playtime is fragmented, dominated by their difficulties, and provides a limited picture about how we might support positive playtime experiences. My findings illustrated both the range of potential challenges some boys with autism may experience at playtime, as well as suggesting positives, and what helps support a positive playtime experience.

Finally, it was through talking to participants that the most unique aspect of this research came through; that playtime can serve various functions for children with autism as part of their school day. Understanding the potential function of playtime for children with autism is essential if we are to make sense of their behaviours while on the playground; and avoid potentially negative portrayals of inactivity as merely the absence of social engagement. Understanding this function may also enable us to develop more nuanced conceptualisations of playtime.

I will now explore how the findings in this research may help school professionals to better support children with autism at playtime in primary schools. It is important at this point to highlight here that this study was about boys with autism, and that research has suggested that boys and girls with autism may experience playtime somewhat differently (Dean et al, 2017; Moyse and Porter, 2015). I will therefore provide a best practice model on supporting boys with autism in particular.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Chapter Overview

With the findings explored with a view to how they may be interpreted as either relating to boys with autism, or related to children's playtime experiences more generally, I will now return to the original research questions. I will begin this chapter by returning to these in relation to the study's findings. I will then present my own development throughout this project, and finally explore the strengths and limitations of the study, possible directions for future research, and implications for educational psychologists.

My original aims were to explore the playtime experiences of primary aged boys with autism using a holistic and strengths-based approach which previous research appeared to be lacking, and to use their views to inform how we might support them to have positive playtime experiences. My specific research questions were:

RQ1: What are the experiences and views of primary aged boys with autism about playtime?

RQ2: How can the experiences and views of primary aged boys with autism inform how we can best support them at playtime?

These will now be explored in relation to key findings.

6.2. RQ1: What are the experiences and views of primary aged boys with autism about playtime?

The following aspects were considered key in relation to the experiences and views of my participants.

6.2.1. Individual differences

Considering the views and experiences of all six participants, the most notable feature of the findings was the variability across the group. Despite similarities, no two participants were exactly the same, and it was these individual differences which appeared most salient to understanding their views and experiences of playtimes within mainstream primary school settings. While no universal truths were suggested about the kinds of experiences participants had, three broad areas appeared to be relevant to understanding their experiences. These were:

- Preferences related to social interactions with peers
- Preferences related to social interactions with adults
- Playstyles and play interests

These will now be considered in turn.

6.2.1.1. Preferences related to social interactions with peers

Participants differed greatly in their preferences related to social interactions with peers. Some participants appeared to interact less with peers at playtime (Sam and Logan) and place less emphasis on the potential for peer interactions. These participants appeared to enjoy solitary play. For other participants (Morgan and Alex), playtime seemed to be viewed as a social time where children could talk, play and interact with one another. Alongside these more polarised views were those participants (Liam and Noah) who found playtime an opportunity to interact with peers, but had other interests beside this. Playtime was therefore viewed very differently by each participant, and understanding participants preferences related to peer interactions helped to make sense of their playtime experiences.

6.2.1.2. Preferences related to social interactions with adults

Another way in which participants brought individually unique perspectives about their playtimes related to their view of the role adults might take. For instance, some participants (Liam and Sam) spoke about wanting more adult involvement in their playtimes. Sam highlighted how much he liked having his assigned adult to play with at playtime. Other participants (Noah and Alex) reported precisely the opposite, and expressed finding the experience of having an assigned adult remain with them during playtime uncomfortable. In both cases, it was understanding the individuals unique view of adults at playtime which best helped to understand their experiences.

6.2.1.3. Playstyles and play interests

A further aspect which differed across the participant group was their play styles and preferences for particular activities. Two participants (Morgan and Liam) spent a large proportion of their playtimes engaging in team sport activities such as football. Even this was experienced differently however, with Liam expressing his frustration over conflicts arising when playing football, while Morgan appeared able to deescalate conflicts quickly and enjoy playing football. For other participants, team sports featured very little; Alex and his peers played imagination and chasing games for the duration of playtime, and explored secluded areas within the playground together. Noah and Sam enjoyed playing on the trim trails each of their schools had, with Sam using these and other physical apparatus outside to play

independently, where Noah appeared to move between playing with physical apparatus and more social play with his peers.

In sum, a range of individual differences appeared to exist between all six participants, and these differences seemed to mediate the kind of activities they played and experiences they had at playtime.

6.2.2. Playtime can serve a function

The majority of participants suggested that playtime served a unique function. Playtime appeared to offer something to these participants which was perhaps different from the rest of their school day. The functions playtime appeared to serve participants differed, and this may have been related to their individual differences across the three areas mentioned above. For Liam and Noah, playtime seemed to be viewed as time of the school day where they could reflect their day or week ahead, prepare themselves for upcoming lessons, or for Noah, recap on learning. These participants seemed to view playtime as a useful time of the school day for quiet reflection, among other things. This was an important finding, since it was only through speaking to participants that the value of quiet self-reflection was apparent. Without understanding how these participants were using playtime to reflect and process, it would have been easy to misinterpret or else limit the meaning of their behaviour as a lack of social interaction.

For Alex and Morgan the experience of playtime appeared to centre around something quite different, socialising with peers. These participants took part in a great deal of social activities with peers at playtime, and viewed this time of the school day as a highly social. Morgan also highlighted the chance to move around and be active at playtime being important. Finally, half of the participants indicated that they viewed playtime as time for the children to be having fun.

6.2.3. A range of potential challenges

A key finding of this research has been that the participants appeared to experience a range of challenges during playtime. The majority of participants viewed playtime as a time where peers might physical hurt them, tease them, or call them names. The views of participants suggested a broader array of potential challenges than previously considered however. These potential challenges differed across the participant group, and included issues such

as: finding occupation through games, being followed by adults, feeling overwhelmed by additional children being outside, issues related to rules, and in Logan's case, possible anxiety about going on the playground, and isolation from it.

6.2.4. Playtime can be a positive experience

A final aspect of the views some participants expressed in relation to their experiences, was the enjoyment they had at playtime. This was an important finding given the range of literature which has indicated the difficulties they experience (Calder et al, 2012; Kasari et al, 2011; Locke et al, 2016; Rodriguez-Medina et al, 2018; Ingram et al, 2007). Over half of the participants reported having positive playtimes in general. Sam, who spent a great deal of his interview reporting the frustration he experienced with his peer's behaviour on the playground, nonetheless commented on the fun and enjoyment he experienced at playtime.

6.3. RQ2: How can the experiences and views of primary aged boys with autism inform how we can best support them at playtime?

Given the variety of experiences participants had at playtime, and the varied way in which they viewed it, supporting them appeared related to a broad array of potential factors. As mentioned in the Discussion chapter, external, individual, and interpersonal factors all appeared relevant to how participants experienced their playtime. I will now explore the aspects of these which appeared most crucial in supporting them. I will end this section by presenting my 'model of best practice' for supporting boys with autism at playtime, which brings together the key aspects of this section.

6.3.1. Consider the physical context of the playground

A key aspect of over half of the participants' experiences, was that the physical landscape of the school playground appeared to matter. As mentioned, individual differences existed between participants playstyles and preferences. Some participants talked about specific playground apparatus they enjoyed, such as the school trim trail. Others indicated that having more space at playtime was beneficial. Various participants also suggested other playground apparatus, games or activities that could be provided to improve their playtime experience.

This suggested that having a range of playground apparatus and activities on offer at playtime would best include the play interests of a variety of children. It is possible that such an approach for supporting boys with autism might also benefit other children at playtime.

6.3.2. Define how rules will be managed at playtime

Given the frustration and confusion experienced by some participants (Liam and Sam) when rules were broken by peers and adults at playtime, it is likely that careful consideration to rule management at playtime would be useful. The primary concern of this may well be how the school manages it when a boy with autism is experiencing difficulties related to rules not being followed on the playground. One approach could be to develop a clear system of rules which is made available to all children and adults and is closely followed. Another approach could be to support the child to become accustomed to the rule flexibility which may occur while on the playground. Regardless of the approach taken, it is likely that creating greater coherence between a boy with autism who is struggling with this aspect of playtime, and the way others behave in relation to rules, may improve his playtime experience.

6.3.3. Know the child's social interaction preferences

Given the huge variation of the participant group's experiences, an important aspect in supporting boys with autism is being aware that every child will differ greatly in how they need to be supported. It is therefore important to know a range of unique qualities about the child as an individual; with their preferences related to peer and adult interactions at playtime being particularly important. This was highlighted by the way Alex and Noah found the support they had been provided uncomfortable, and how Noah reported the limitations he felt the adult placed on his freedom at playtime. Knowing whether a child would like an adult to support them at playtime may not be the only factor in deciding to provide them with one. However, this research has suggested that it could be an important consideration if school professionals wish to truly help a boy with autism to experience playtime positively.

Another factor which arose was whether the child prefers time interacting with peers at playtime, or whether they value solitary time. This solitary time may be something the child wants, and could be valued for a variety of reasons (including wanting time to reflect and process their day). The participant group varied greatly in relation to their social interactions with peers and also their wish to be engaged with peers at playtime; with some participants like Noah, actually preferring time away from peers sometimes. This is an important

consideration when trying to support boys with autism to have positive playtime experiences, since without understanding the preferences of the child, school professionals might provide support which is in fact not in line with what the child wants.

6.3.4. Know the child's social and coping skills

Some participants social skills and coping strategies appeared to impact on their playtime experiences. The importance of social skills could be seen in the cases of Morgan and Sam; with Morgan engaging with peers constantly, and managing potential conflicts on the playground with ease, where Sam appeared to become involved in negative social interactions with his peers which he struggled to predict, manage, or (at times) resolve without adult support. It appeared that having social skills enabled participants to have more successful interactions with peers at playtime. Like Morgan, Noah also engaged with peers with apparent ease, yet Noah used these skills to engage with peers intermittently. Therefore, it is likely that improving the social skills of a boy with autism may enable them to engage in social interactions with peers with greater ease. The purpose of this kind of intervention may not be about increasing the extent of those interactions, but rather be about providing social interactions skills the child is able to use when they wish to. Again, the social interaction preferences of the child are relevant in understanding how to support them, and how to measure the benefit of that support.

Liam indicated that having coping strategies to manage his feelings, and to find ways to reduce the potential for conflict with peers, was a beneficial approach to having positive playtime experiences. This was only suggested by Liam, yet it is possible to tentatively suggest that developing a child's coping strategies might help them manage aspects of their playtime experiences.

Knowing the social skills and coping strategies of the child, and working towards developing these may be seen as one way in which school professionals may support boys with autism at playtime. These kinds of support may be viewed as 'within child' approaches, which I do not intend as a criticism, but is highlighted here only to suggest that boys with autism may be supported in a range of ways at various levels.

6.3.5. Be aware of a range of potential challenges

The range of potential challenges highlighted by the views and experiences of participants suggested that, alongside concerns about the potential for difficulties with peers interactions,

school professionals might also consider a range of potential challenges boys with autism may experience. It is also important that school professionals do not assume that the child has challenges at playtime, or assume what these challenges may be, since some participants appeared to manage well and enjoy playtime.

6.3.6. Include and inform the child

Overall, the importance of understanding the views and experiences of boys with autism in order to provide effective support for them at playtime has been highlighted. The views of boys with autism about playtime may be a crucial component which should inform how we support them. As such, including the child in the process of developing a support plan is likely to be essential if school professionals wish to truly support their experiences at playtime. This was indicated by Noah and Alex's discomfort with being provided an adult aid, it was also suggested by the range of social interaction preferences indicated across the participant group. The indication that playtime serves a variety of functions for some boys with autism is another indication that their inclusion in decision making is necessary in providing effective support.

It is therefore essential that support for boys with autism at playtime is at least partly based on what they perceive needing support with, and on the experiences they have. Additionally, Alex reported that he found the use of an adult aid particularly uncomfortable because he did not know why this intervention had been provided. This led Alex to report feeling his supporting adult was 'stalking' him, and further implies that some boys with autism may benefit from being informed about the interventions which are chosen to support them, and the reasons behind these.

In sum, in order to support a boy with autism to do well at playtime, there appears to be a lot you need to know about them. Without understanding what makes them unique as an individual the support offered may contradict with their preferences and be experienced negatively. This research has suggested that there is no universal approach to supporting boys with autism at playtime, and that their support is best achieved through understanding what makes them unique, their preferences, and keeping them involved in the process. Based on this, I will now present my 'model of best practice' for supporting boys with autism at playtime.

6.3.7. Model of best practice for supporting boys with autism during playtime

The following model (see below for graphic) was developed based on the findings in relation to each research question. Once developed, it was clear that the model might fit well into a schools' existing 'assess, plan, do, review' cycle (CoP, 2014). (see Appendix 17 for further details of how this model was developed). Supporting boys with autism at playtime was seen as a cyclical process which should involve the child at every stage. This began with speaking to the child to understand their views about playtime, then considering the physical context of the school playground itself, and also observing the child at playtime. Following the information provided by the first two stages a plan might then be developed, and enacted. The final stage of the model involves reviewing the plan, considering what has changed, and deciding ways forwards. I will now explain considerations within each stage of the model. It is important to remember that the model was created based on the view of six participants, and did not include perspectives beyond boys diagnosed with autism in relation to playtime. As such, the model should be seen as a useful starting point for supporting boys with autism at playtime, and not as a panacea.

6.3.7.1. *Speak to the child*

The first two stages of the model involve information gathering in order to develop the support plan. At this initial stage the primary focus should be understanding the unique perspectives of the child about their playtime experiences. Key considerations include their preferences for social interactions with peers and/or adults, what activities they enjoy or like less, and whether they report any challenges. It is important to not assume that a boy with autism will experience challenges in every case, and school professionals should remain open-minded about the range of other potential experiences (including other challenges) children may have. A key consideration at this stage for some boys with autism will be whether playtime serves a particular function for them. Understanding this is likely to inform the appropriateness of future support.

6.3.7.2. *Observe their play and the physical context*

Once a clear picture of the child's views about their playtimes is gathered, school professionals might then consider observing them at playtime to gather the final information relevant to their support plan. Considerations at this stage should include factors such as their social skills and capacity to manage conflict and use coping strategies where required. The variability of physical apparatus on the playground, and whether improvements could be made, and how rules are managed, adhered to, or used flexibly by both the child and those around them should be considered at this stage. Where there is an incoherence between

how the child views rules at playtime (rigidly or flexibly) and how those around the child employ them, a key aspect of the support plan may involve addressing this.

6.3.7.3. Consider systemic factors and the role of others

As well as considering the context of the playground itself, those supporting boys with autism should also consider the system of people surrounding the child as well. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) 'ecological systems model' suggested that beyond the individual, children are influenced by the systems surrounding them, and that their behaviour and indeed experience is influenced by this system. As such, key individuals surrounding the child may include peers, parents, and teaching assistants present at playtime.

For instance, this research has suggested that incoherence between boys with autism and their peers in relation to rule following caused conflicts at times. One way this could be supported could be to provide peer education to other children in the school. Watkins et al (2015) suggested that peers can play a crucial role in supporting children with autism to manage at playtime. This was also indicated by Oches et al (2003), who suggested that where peers were aware of a child's diagnosis, they were more accepting of children with autism. As such, supporting boys with autism may well involve considering what factors, if any, may be causing challenges at playtime, and deciding whether peer education about autism, special education needs and diversity, or perhaps simply unique factors about a particular child's experience, may be of benefit.

Hutman et al (2009) highlighted that it is often parents who form the first playmates for children with autism, and that mothers are often well informed about their child's social experiences and have developed ways to manage this. As such, a further consideration should be the involvement of parents in the process of developing a plan of support. Since it is likely they will have a unique insight into their child's behaviour, including their play and social interests, and will also be able to discuss the plan further with their child at home.

A key element of this research has been that boys with autism have varied preferences for how teaching assistants support them at playtime. This was indicated by Calder et al (2013), who highlighted that teaching assistants can support children with autism to be more interactive at playtime, but that this sometimes went against the child's wish to play alone. As such, teaching assistants should ensure they have an awareness of the plan of support, and that they know the child's preferences in relation to being supported. No two boys are likely to be the same, therefore teaching assistants should ask boys how they would like to engage with them at playtime, and develop an agreement in relation to this. Since factors impacting on playtime experiences may relate to one another, the experience of being

supported by a teaching assistant may change for some boys. Teaching assistants should be conscious of this, and provide opportunities to meet with the child and review their support.

6.3.7.4. Develop the plan

Once the two stages of information gathering are complete, and the role of individuals surrounding the child have been considered, a support plan based on the child views and experiences can be made. This may include involving the child again at this stage, and intervention strategies may be agreed with them. Harts' (1997) 'Ladder of Participation' may be appropriate at this stage when considering how comfortable involvement in decision making the child may be, and ensuring their involvement is not 'tokenistic'. Interventions developed at this stage may include within child interventions (which develop the child's existing social skills and coping strategies), and/or more systemic approaches (such as developing the playground site and increasing the variability of physical apparatus available at playtime; developing a clear strategy regarding how rules are managed at playtime; defining the role of adults on the playground; considering peer education, involving parents and considering their role in supporting the plan and in some cases providing an adult aid to support the child. No two plans for supporting boys with autism at playtime are likely to be the same, and the exact interventions chosen should be based on the unique understanding of the child based on the two information gathering stages.

6.3.7.5. Enact the plan

Once a plan has been agreed with the child, this should be enacted for a short period. The exact period may differ across contexts, yet the schools existing 'assess, plan, do, review' timescale may be the most useful marker.

6.3.7.6. Review

The final stage of the model involves reviewing progress and any changes which have occurred. Some aspects to review may be the development of new social skills and coping strategies. Whether the child is experiencing name calling, or being hurt by peers should also be reviewed. My findings suggested that social skills, and negative experiences when interacting with peers appeared to predict whether participants valued an adult aid at playtime. Therefore, the use of an adult aid may deserve particular scrutiny at the review stage, and whether this continues to be required, and remains a positive experience for the child should be explored. Again, those individuals which may influence the system surrounding the child should be involved in the review alongside the child.

How rules are being managed may also be reviewed, as well as any changes in the child's preferences related to activities and interactions with peers and adults. It may in some cases be useful to return the start of the process and complete the cycle again at this stage, or consider key aspects of the model which were previously not mentioned by the child.

The factors which support a positive playtime experience for boys with autism may well interact with one another. Considering Frederickson and Cameron's (1999) 'Interacting Factors Framework' could be a useful way to explore at the early stages of information gathering, and be returned to at the review.

See below for the graphic of the model I created.

I will now provide a critique of the study, before considering my own development, future research, and implications for educational psychologists.

Supporting boys with autism at playtime

Function:
Be aware of a variety of possible functions playtime may serve, and how this may present itself in the child's behaviour.

Individual differences:
Consider play interests and social interaction preferences and keep support in line with this.

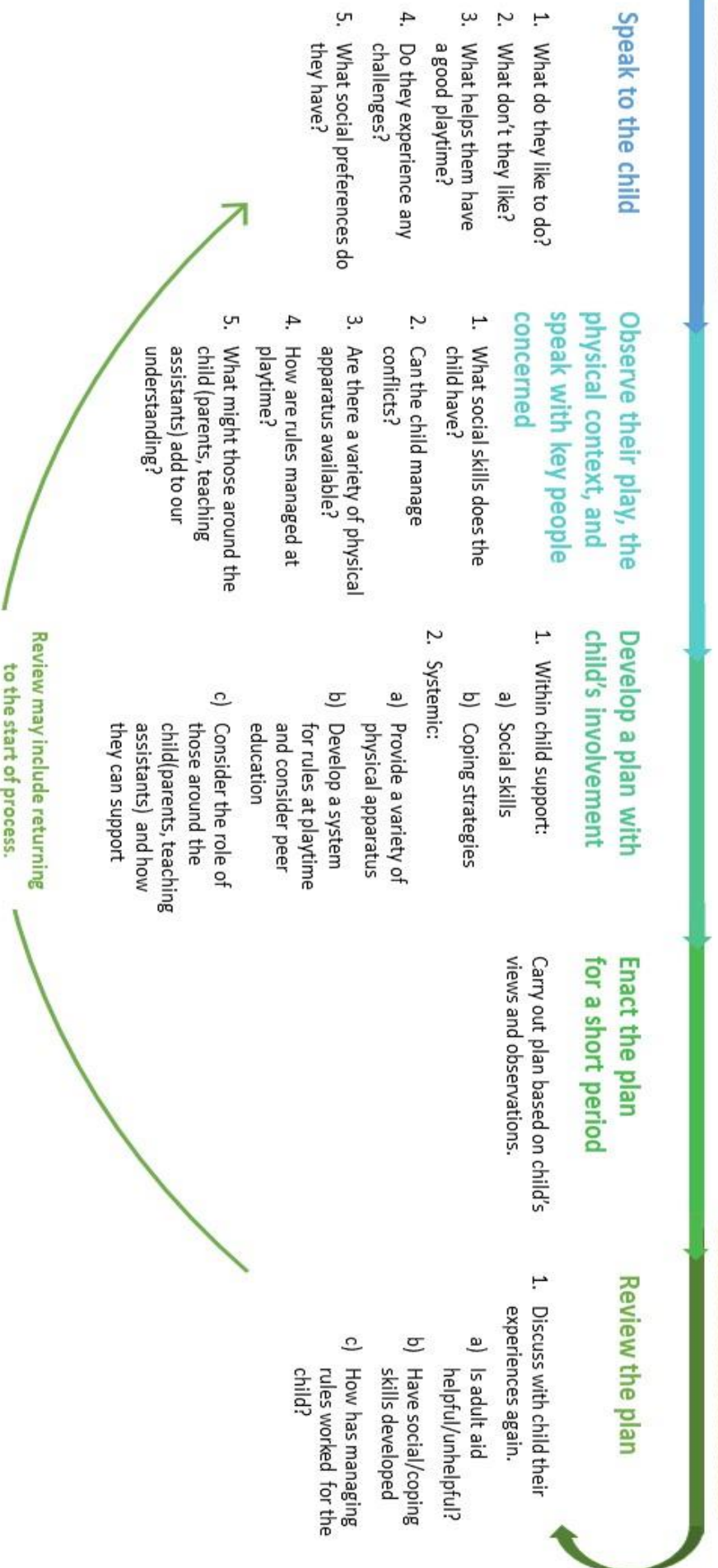


Figure 8: showing a 'best practice' model for supporting boys with autism at playtime.

6.4. A critique of the study

5.4.1. Strengths and unique contribution

As mentioned in the Literature Review chapter, there appeared to be a gap in the research literature when concerning the playtime experiences of boys with autism. Previous research has included some aspect of playtime experiences alongside a wider remit of exploring school experiences for children with autism. Those few studies which have looked at playtime specifically, have largely come from health-related professions, and used quantitative methodologies which do not take into consideration the child's view. To my knowledge this is the first study which aimed to gain the views of primary aged boys with autism solely focusing on their playtime experiences in mainstream primary schools.

Due to the focus on quantitative approaches in this area, I chose to explore the topic in a qualitative way through thematic analysis of observations and semi-structured interviews. This allowed the child's voice to come through further than had previously been made possible in this area of research. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to talk about aspects of playtime which were most pertinent to them. I was also guided by participants towards the possible positive aspects of playtime. This allowed a range of previously unconsidered aspects of their playtime experience to emerge and demonstrated the potentially limited or even pathologised way in which children with autism have been conceptualised in relation to their playtime experiences to date.

My wish to triangulate the child's views with my own observations in order to gain further insight into their experiences and to improve the strength of final themes could be seen as another positive aspect of the research. I was able to include boys from a range of year groups, and with a variety of experiences, interests, and skillsets. I was determined to create something useful for school professionals to use in supporting boys with autism, and the variability of such a small sample could be seen as a strength of the research, and although only a small-scale study, has helped to ensure a range of experiences have been considered in generating the 'model of best practice'.

5.4.2. Limitations and issues with the study

There were, like any piece of research, some limitations to the present study. Foremost was the small-scale nature of the study, which included the views and experiences of just six participants. Since a key finding within the study was the apparent variability of experiences, and varied potential ways to support boys with autism based on these, it is possible that the

findings provide only a section of potential experiences boys with autism may have during playtime which may not generalise to the larger population. Nonetheless, my participant group were highly varied themselves, and I have highlighted within the 'model of best practice' the need to include the views of boys with autism when supporting them because of the variation of experiences possible. I would hope that keeping this principle at the centre of supporting them through the model would allow practitioners to accommodate for a range of potential needs at playtime.

My methodology and method has been something which, in hindsight may have been conducted differently. I observed children for just two occasions, which may only provide indications of typical playtime experiences, rather than be truly representative of participants day to day experiences. I have tried to emphasise this throughout. I have wondered whether an ethnographic study may have resolved this aspect to create more 'immersive' observation data, yet I wanted the primary focus to be on participants own views, with observation data partly used to triangulate and as a back-up if my participants struggled during interview.

Recruitment was an area of the research that proved difficult in some ways. I had interest from a great deal of older male participants, but just one participant from key stage one. I also only included children with at least basic verbal skills, making it is possible that the experiences and views presented only represent those who express themselves verbally. On reflection, the presence of a teaching assistant during two of my participant interviews was an ethically complex situation. Although I was able to interview participants without any comment from the teaching assistant in both cases, the potential influence this adult's presence had on the words of participants is difficult to know. As such, it is possible that these participants may have provided a different account of their experiences should their teaching assistant not been present. Alex also spoke about the problems he had with having a teaching assistant support him at playtime during his interview, which his teaching assistant was witness to. This was an ethically sensitive point in the research, and I had to manage both my wish to remain focused on the topic of playtime, alongside my duty to ensure the relationship between Alex and his teaching assistant was not impacted on negatively. Finally, I did not include girls in the study, and since it has been suggested that girls have somewhat different playtime experiences, it is important to be aware of this when considering the findings.

Having considered the strengths and limitations of the study, I will now provide some reflections on my own development throughout this research.

6.5. Reflections on my personal and professional development

It took a long time to decide on the topic of my thesis, and I explored a great deal of alternative topics before deciding on this one. Halfway through the project I questioned whether I had made the right decision. I read the existing literature on playtime experiences for children with autism, and began to feel concerned about the potential for my research to further add to pathological conceptualisations of autism through exploring their difficulties. I realised that I had begun this research in much the same way as previous researchers, with a concern for the difficulties children with autism may experience at playtime. I had created audio recordings of my thoughts about participants following each interview, which were created in order to be reflexive through the process of the research. When I listened to these I could hear how focused I had been on their difficulties at first. This came from a place of wanting to help children, but on reflection I have realised that it may not have been an entirely helpful stance to take. I had already done my data gathering when I noticed this, and when I came to analysis I could see in my interviews the interest I clearly had in my participants difficulties.

However, once I had begun to develop themes, I realised that my participants were expressing more than just their difficulties. On reflection, I am pleased that I was able to create a space for other things to come to light, despite any bias in what I expected I might hear. Therefore, it was only towards the end of the writeup that I 'made up' with the research and began to view the study as providing an important message about the experiences of boys with autism. I set out to explore the social difficulties boys with autism face in schools at playtime, and discovered that their experiences are broader, more complex, and more meaningful than I had imagined.

On reflection, I have realised that it is easy to take on existing narratives about children with autism. It appears to me that research evidence can be guided by research interest, and that research interest can be guided by existing narratives and discourses. Therefore, I have learnt how important it is for researchers to explore their topics of interests with an open mind about what they may find, and to create a space for a range of experiences to come to light. I have also realised that my own playtime experiences came from a romantic view (Blatchford and Sharp, 1994), and my view of playtime as an enjoyable and special time, led me further towards a negative picture of those children who engaged with playtime differently. Professionals are likely to bring their own conceptualisations of what playtime is, and these clearly need to be examined carefully to ensure they are helpful.

The research has taught me to really scrutinise my interpretations when observing children. When developing the 'model of best practice' I chose to place speaking to the child before observing them, though this was not the order in which I gathered my data. I did this because it was only through speaking to my participants that some of their behaviours became meaningful. I was also aware during the analysis that I had a varied data set, particularly with regards to interview data. Some participants were highly articulate, which enabled me to reflect on the diversity of the needs in participants, and that some children with autism in fact do not appear to find expressing their views difficult. This meant that at times, the use of the creative methods I had originally intended to use was not necessary. Beresford et al (2004) suggested that the use of visual methods, games and activities can help children with autism express their views better during interviews. I provided creative methods such as drawing activities or Lego when I felt this would help the participant think through their experiences, and state their views more clearly, yet in my research the use of creative methods in most cases tended to distract participants from the conversation, and indeed from the topic of playtime altogether at times. As such, I have realised that researchers would do well to remain open minded about how children with autism may engage with interviews, since most participants were highly articulate, and those who were less so did not appear to benefit from the creative methods I adopted. Another consideration for researchers is how to balance the views of those who articulate themselves clearly, with those that find this more challenging. I chose to provide individual summaries of each participant in order to demonstrate each participant's unique experience, which was in part to ensure those who were less articulate were not lost among the words of those more able to articulate themselves. For those less articulate participants, this meant looking closely at what was said, seeking to infer meaning, and constantly checking I had not gone beyond what it was possible to infer from their words.

Finally, when writing about children with autism a key consideration was whether to describe them as 'autistic' or as 'having autism'. This felt like an important and difficult decision to make, as I would be constructing autism in one way or another whatever I chose, and I could not remain 'on the fence', as it were. I initially chose to use the phrase 'autistic', as some people with autism have said they prefer this (Kenny et al, 2016), feeling their autism is a part of who they are. Since this research has been about promoting the voice of children with autism, this felt like a good approach to take at first. However, I was struck by indications within the literature that children with autism have a range of personality traits that may not relate to their autism. Dean et al's (2017) suggestion that boys with autism play more like other boys at playtime, than they do girls with autism made me begin to question my decision. I was also struck by the potential similarities between my findings about the

playtime experiences of boys with autism, and the literature related to children without autism, which became a central point within the Discussion chapter. This led me to reflect on the potential that when considering my participants, their experiences of playtime reflected partly their having autism, but possibly a range of other personality traits, including their gender. I do not assume that there is a 'right' answer on this, but using a person first approach became the most justifiable way to describe my participants based on these factors. I therefore chose to change my stance on describing this group of individuals, which meant changing the wording of the entire first three chapters, and became a choice I felt I had truly committed to.

6.6. Future research

This research has highlighted a range of playtime experiences for primary aged boys with autism in mainstream primary schools. The study adds to the existing literature, further indicating the challenges boys with autism experience with being hurt or called names by their peers. The study has also gone beyond this, to suggest a wider array of potential challenges, and shed light on the positive aspects of playtime. Nonetheless, research on the topic of playtime which includes the views of children with autism remains limited, with many gaps remaining in our understanding.

This study has suggested that greater coherence around managing rules at playtime may help benefit boys with autism. However, this was based on just a few participant's experiences, and underlying theory about how rules might best be managed on the school playground for boys with autism remains unclear. A study which compared supporting boys with autism to be more flexible about rules at playtime, to supporting the school as a whole to have a stronger set of playtime rules which everyone followed, could help us to understand how best to support boys with autism during these times.

Another key aspect of this study has been the indication that adults were viewed differently by a range of participants. A study which further explored the role of adults for children with autism at playtime could further guide school professionals in what works when providing an adult aide.

This study only included the views and experiences of boys with autism. Research has suggested that girls with autism experience playtime differently to boys, and that they spend more time talking with peers than playing structured games (Dean et al, 2017; Moyse and Porter, 2015). As such, it is possible that the emphasis on the physical context of the

playground may be of less concern for some girls with autism. Until further research is carried out in this area, the model provided in this study can only be said to be relevant to boys with autism.

Finally, I chose to include boys who were able to express themselves verbally. Further research which seeks to promote the views of children with autism who are less verbal needs to be done if we are to understand the full range of experiences playtime presents them. In sum, more research is needed which takes the child's view into consideration if we are to develop effective support plans for children with autism for this time of the school day.

6.7. Implications for educational psychologists

A key feature of this research has been its emphasis on promoting the voice of children. This has led to a range of new insights into what playtime means for boys with autism, and indicates the importance of research and practice which includes the views of children. The role of educational psychologists in facilitating child-voice, and including the views of children in decision making processes about them dates back to the UNCRC (1989). This role was further instilled as a primary duty of educational psychologists with the introduction of the new CoP (2014). Educational psychologists are therefore well placed to support boys with autism to have positive playtime experiences, since they are skilled in supporting children to express their views, and able to relay this to a range of audiences. As such, educational psychologists would be able to support schools during the two information gathering stages of the model for supporting boys with autism at playtime.

The model I provided has suggested that factors need to be considered at both a within-child level, as well as at a systemic level. At a systemic level, both the physical context of the school playground, as well as the system of people surrounding the child need to be considered. This study therefore could be taken to illustrate the value of the 'ecological systems model' originally proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). Fallon et al (2010) stated educational psychologists work at a range of different levels when supporting children, families, and helping to develop school systems. As such, they are likely a good professional to involve in developing a plan for boys with autism, since educational psychologists are already trained to consider factors at a systemic level which impact on children's school experiences.

I have suggested that involving the child in the process of decision making could be important in providing effective support. The CoP (2014; 2015) stipulated that professionals

work in collaboration with children and families when developing support plans for them. Hart's (1997) 'Ladder of Participation' has also suggested that the child's age and maturity level must also be taken into consideration. Educational psychologists work alongside school professionals and collaborate with children and families to create support plans through statutory processes (CoP, 2015). As such, they are well placed to help school professionals consider an appropriate level of child involvement.

Another important aspect of this research has been the potential for some factors which supported a positive playtime experience to interact with one another. This led me to suggest within the model of best practice that reviewing progress will be important. My placement experiences have suggested that the use of reviews within casework varies between practitioners. My study has illustrated how important reviewing the plan can be in some cases, since changes in one aspect of a child's playtime experiences may have wider changes for them. The complexity of the factors which support a positive playtime experience could make the involvement of an educational psychologist valuable at the review stage, since we are trained to provide hypotheses on a range of interacting factors (Fallon et al, 2010). Frederickson and Cameron's (1999) 'Interacting Factors Framework' could be a useful tool which educational psychologists may employ here.

I have highlighted that it was only when I spoke to my participants that I more fully understood the potential meaning behind their behaviours at playtime. Miller et al (2013) highlighted the subjective nature of a single 'snap shot' short observation. My research has suggested that, as well as considering how long an observation is, educational psychologists might also consider when they choose to observe a child as part of their information gathering tools. Choosing to observe children after speaking to them may make any professional less discrete, yet it may also allow them to more fully understand the behaviours they witness.

The value of considering the strengths of my participants, and what helps them as well as what they find difficult, has been a key aspect of this research. This enabled me to present a more diverse picture of the experiences of boys with autism at playtime than previously provided. Educational psychologists typically work with children who are experiencing problems. Yet my inclusion criteria in this research did not include that the individual must be experiencing any difficulties at playtime. As such, it is possible that my participant group represents a somewhat different cohort of individuals than the typical caseload of a practicing educational psychologist. This is important, since it means educational psychologists may work with only those children with autism who are experiencing difficulties, and be less aware of those children who manage well. This in turn could lead

some educational psychologists, and trainee educational psychologists, to develop pathologised conceptualisations of children with autism. The importance of a strengths-based approach in our work with children is therefore indicated. So too is the need to constantly reflect on our conceptualisations of children with particular diagnoses, where they come from, and how the nature of our work may influence our own understandings.

6.8. Concluding remarks

This study involved exploring the experiences and views of boys with autism about their playtime, while attending mainstream primary schools. The findings have provided further insights into the wide range of playtime experiences boys with autism may have. The inclusion of child-voice in the study has suggested that playtime can serve a function for some boys with autism. The study has indicated that the inclusion of the views of children with autism in both research related to their experiences, and practice related to their support, is required if school professionals are to develop effective support plans.

Educational psychologists may be well placed to help support school professionals in both understanding the experiences of boys with autism at playtime, including their views in decision making, and develop hypotheses about why issues arise and how to tackle them.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Expression of interest form for schools.

Please provide your name, school, and email address in the spaces provided below if you are interested in your school participating in the proposed study. You will be contacted via email to confirm your interest and to send a consent form for you to fill out. Following this the further information will be sent to the parents of any children you identify.

Name:

School:

Email:

Peter Dunning,
Trainee Educational Psychologist,
University of Bristol
Email: pete.dunning@LA-name.gov.uk

Appendix 2: Information sheet for schools.



8 Priory Road, Bristol, BS8 1TZ
T: 01452 324333
Pete.dunning@LA-name.gov.uk

Study Title: Exploring the experiences of boys with autism during playtime in primary schools.

School information sheet

Dear Head teacher,

Thank-you for taking the time to read this letter. My name is Peter Dunning, and I am currently in my second year of training on the Doctorate qualification for Educational Psychology at Bristol University. I am on placement at LA-name Educational Psychology Service as a Trainee Educational Psychologist.

As part of my doctorate, I am carrying out a research project which explores the experiences of children with a diagnosis of autism during playtime. Unstructured times of the school day, such as playtime, have been found to be times when children with autism can face significant challenges. Yet little research has explored the experiences children have during playtime, or what these times mean to them, and even less has considered the views of children with autism about these times. In my research I intend to address this gap in the knowledge base and answer the 3 questions below. Your school has been selected at random from within the county of LA-name.

Question 1: What are the experiences of primary aged children with a diagnosis of autism during playtime?

Question 2: What are the views of primary aged children with a diagnosis of autism about what happens during playtimes?

Question 3: What role do schools and/or educational psychologists have in supporting children with autism in mainstream schools during playtime?

What would participating in the research involve?

I am hoping to include up to 6 children in the study, however I would only seek up to 2 children to participate from your school. If you agree to go ahead with the research, I would send you the information and expression of interest forms to send out to families of potential participants. Once parents have returned the expression of interest forms I would arrange to discuss the study with them, and see whether they would consent for their child to participate. I would then like to visit the child within school to explain the study and see if they would be happy to take part. If there are more than 2 children within your school with a diagnosis of autism, I would like to go through this process with all the children and then randomly choose 2 children from those that have agreed to take part. Parents whose children would not be taking part would then be informed by myself.

If you agree, I would then like to observe each selected child during their playtime, and later interview them. I would visit the child within school to observe them during their morning, afternoon, and lunchtime break. I would ideally like to see the children on different days. So if it worked for you, I would come on one day to make a morning and/or lunch observation, and then visit again another day for the afternoon observation. If there were two children in your school participating I would observe them on the same days if it worked for you. This would mean over three days I would make two observations a day until each child had been seen in their morning, afternoon and lunch playtimes; this would mean the maximum I would be observing during playtime would be on 6 occasions for your school.

If you agree, I would then like to interview the child for up to one hour whilst in school. Finally, I would like to return to the school for a final visit to thank the child and ensure I have recorded what was discussed correctly, and if everyone is happy for me to proceed with using the information I have gathered.

What information would be recorded and how?

During the observations at playtime I will make brief notes about what the participating child is doing/saying, their interactions with peers and adults, what they choose to play with, and where they choose to play. The focus of my notes will be the child who is participating in the study. I would only write down information about anyone else if it was relevant to what the participant was doing, and only if they were happy for me to do so. During the interviews I will record what is said between myself and the participant on a digital voice recorder. This will later be transcribed, analysed, and the results will be written up. The interviews will include the use of activities and pictures to help children reflect on their experiences. They will focus on gaining the children's views of their playtime experiences and what it is like for

them during these times. I would also take a picture of any drawings, or models which are built during the interview.

The anonymity of the school and child involved would be ensured at every stage of the research. Any identifying information about the child or the school will be removed so that each remains anonymous. Any reference to the school would be described through a label, such as 'School 1'. The child would be given a different name in the write up, so they could not be identified.

What happens if I don't want my school to take part?

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary, and the school is in no way obliged to participate. This is also true of families and children within the school, who have the right to not take part as well. Participants or their families may also decide to withdraw from the study while data collection is being carried out, and up to one week following my final visit to the school. This is also fine, and all data about their child would be destroyed and not included in my findings.

What are the benefits of the research?

I hope that participating in the study will be enjoyable for the children, and that it will give them a chance to express their views about their own experiences. The study would also be adding to the evidence base about providing support to children with autism in mainstream settings. This would also help professionals to understand children's views and experiences. As well as focusing on an important aspect of children's lives that is comparatively under-researched.

If your school agreed to participate in the study, I would also be able to send you a brief summary of the overall findings at the end.

Data protection

The information collected from participants will be entirely confidential, and data will be anonymised so neither the school or the individual participant can be identified in any further use of the data. The data collected about your school will be stored on a password protected computer while the research takes place, and all files will be made anonymous. Participants' information will then be stored on a secure database at the University of Bristol for 20 years, with restricted access, in an anonymised format, and is conditional upon the University of Bristol complying with the duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act.

The final study would be written up for my doctoral thesis, and further use of the data may include presenting the findings at conferences or in peer reviewed journals. In

this case the same anonymity for the school and the participants would be ensured at every stage.

During the interviews, it is important to note however the limits to confidentiality, for example if participants disclosed information that revealed they were at risk of harm, I would need to disclose this information immediately. I would follow the schools policy for handling disclosures in this case. For instance, I will ensure I am aware of the schools child protection lead professional prior to conducting research within the setting, and would contact this person immediately should a child say anything to me that caused me concern over their safety, or the safety of another individual.

Next steps

If you are happy for your school to participate, I would ask that you return the expression of interest form to me, or contact me using the below email address or contact number. It may be useful to agree a named professional within the school for me to liaise with for seeking parental consent. If you agree to this I could then send with them/yourself the information sheet and expression of interest forms for them to send out to all the appropriate families.

With your agreement, and parent and child both consenting to take part, I would also need to inform the participants' class of my observations of their playtime. However the exact nature of the study will only be known to yourselves, and the individual participants' parents. I can arrange for this to be sent out once participants have been chosen.

I hope to commence data collection in April. I would like to reiterate that participation is voluntary and any data collected will be confidential and anonymised. Anyone involved in the research will have the right to withdraw at any point.

Please fill in the expression of interest form if you are happy to participate. If you would like to discuss the project further, please feel free to contact me, or Pauline Heslop, Research supervisor at the University of Bristol.

Thank-you in anticipation, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Kind regards,

Peter Dunning
Pete.Dunning@LA-name.gov.uk
01452 324333

Pauline Heslop
Pauline.Heslop@bristol.ac.uk

Appendix 3: Information sheet for parents



8 Priory Road, Bristol, BS8 1TZ
T: 01452 324333
Pete.dunning@LA-name.gov.uk

Study title: Exploring the experiences of boys with autism during playtime in primary schools.

Parent information sheet

Dear Parent,

My name is Peter Dunning, I am a student from the University of Bristol. As part of the doctoral training programme I am carrying out a some research about the experiences of children with a diagnosis of autism at playtime. This project has been granted ethical approval by the SPS Research Ethics Committee at the University of Bristol where I study.

This information sheet tells you more about the research. If you are interested in your child taking part, please complete the expression of interest form attached, and I will contact you to discuss it with you further. Your child's school has been chosen at random, and you have been chosen because your child has a formal diagnosis of autism.

What is the research about?

The research is looking at what happens during playtime for children with autism. There is not very much research which has asked children with autism to talk about playtime, so this research will be trying to find out what its like from the child's own viewpoint.

I want to answer three questions in the study. They are:

- What is it like for children with autism during playtime in school?
- How do children with autism feel about playtimes at school?
- What can schools do to help children with autism during playtime?

What would my son/daughter have to do?

I'm hoping to speak to speak with up to 6 children, as well as observe them at playtime.

It is important that your child is also happy to take part in the research. So if your agreed, I'd come in to see your child and check they are happy to talk with me. Then I'd like to see what happens at playtime for them. I would like to observe them in their morning, lunchtime, and afternoon breaks, but it will be spread out over 3 days. I'll write down a few notes about what they do and who they talk with. Once I've done that I'd like to visit them again to talk to them about playtime. I'd visit one last time afterwards to say thanks and check I understood everything they said properly.

I will have lots of games (such as lego, drawing, matching games), and pictures to help me and your child talk, and I hope that your child will enjoy talking with me. If you are happy, I will record the conversation using a digital recorder, and later write up what was said.

What would the information be used for?

If you agreed for your child to participate, I would write up the notes I made during the observations, and also write up the recorded conversations. These would be used for my final write up of the project, and go towards my doctoral thesis for my course. I would not write down your child's name or the name of the school though, I would make sure they were kept anonymous at all times. This means no one would know it was your child that the research was about from reading my thesis.

If you were happy, I may want to show what I found in the research to the local authority in LA-name. I may also decide to show what I found to other researchers at conferences, and in academic journals. If I did this I would not include any names, so no one would know it was about your child.

If you agreed, I would also like to use any pictures your child draws, as well as take photographs of how they responded to the activities. If you were happy with it, then I would like to include these in my doctoral thesis, and in any further discussion of the findings. I would ensure that everything that was included was anonymous and could not be used to identify your child. Any photos would be of the work they produced, and not of your child.

What will happen if I don't take part?

It is up to you whether you want your child to take part in the research. If you choose not to take part then they will not be included in the research. If you agree for your child to take part, and then change your mind later, that is also fine. You can decide

to change your mind about your child being in the research during the days when I visit them, and also up to one week after my final visit to them. If you wanted, I would be happy to remove notes I made from my research, and destroy all the recordings of what they said.

You do not have to give me a reason for deciding for deciding your child will not take part in the research.

What are benefits of this research?

There is some research already about what children with autism find difficult at playtime, but not very much of this research has asked the children what they think. This study will help researchers know more about children's feelings about playtime. There is also not very much research about playtime in primary schools. This study will help researchers know more about this time of day for children in schools.

I hope that once we know what children think about playtime, this will help professionals in supporting them in future. I hope that your child will enjoy the games I bring, and like having the chance to say what they think.

Data protection

As I have said, I would take out any names your child says, as well as their own, from anything I write up from the research. The name of the school would also be removed. This means someone reading the study would not know it was your child that the research was about.

When I talk with your child, everything they tell me will be kept confidential. I would keep their privacy, and not share what they said with anyone else. However, if your child said something which made me worried about their safety, or if I thought they or someone else could get hurt, I would have to share this with the schools safeguarding professional straight away.

Once I have written up what your child says, I will store this information securely on a database at the University of Bristol, and it will be kept safely there for 20 years. Access to this will have to be justified by other researchers, so not just anyone can read it. I would also make sure there were no names written down here. So if anyone looked at it they would not know it was about your child.

I would also use an encrypted digital recorder to keep there recordings of our conversation safe, and save these on a password protected computer. Any other information about your child that was written down would be kept in a locked cabinet, and kept separate from where I keep the recordings.

What next?

If you are happy for your child to participate in the study please complete the return the expression of interest form to the school. I would then like to come and meet you to talk more about the research and answer any questions you might have.

If you would like to talk with me about the project more in the meantime, you can reach me on the telephone or email below. Or you can speak to my supervisor, Pauline Heslop, using the details below.

There may be other families at your child's school who have been contacted by me to take part in the research. If there are lots of children in your child's school who agree to take part in the research, I will select at random just 2 of them. This means that if you and your child agreed to take part, I cannot guarantee your child will be chosen for the research. I will let you know 1 week after your child agrees they would like to talk with me, whether they have been chosen.

Thank-you, I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Kind regards,

Peter Dunning
Pete.Dunning@LA-name.gov.uk
T: 01452 324333

Pauline Heslop
Pauline.Heslop@bristol.ac.uk

Appendix 4: Parental expression of interest form.

Please provide your full name, your address, and the name of your school in the spaces provided below if you are interested in your child participating in the proposed study. You will be sent a consent form for you to fill out and return.

Name:

Address

School:

Peter Dunning,
Trainee Educational Psychologist,
University of Bristol
Email: pete.dunning@La-named.gov.uk

Appendix 5: Visual information sheet for potential participants

I am Peter Dunning. I am a student researcher. This means I ask people questions and find things out.



I am trying to find out about what happens at playtime in school.

I want to find out what it is like for you at playtime.



<p>Your parents said you might want to help me find out about playtime.</p> <p>You don't have to help me, I can talk to someone else.</p> <p>If you don't want to, that's ok.</p>	
<p>If you are happy to, I will watch what happens at playtime for you.</p> <p>I will come out at playtime 3 times.</p>	
<p>If you are happy to, I will speak to you about what happens at playtime.</p> <p>We can do some drawing and other activities when we talk.</p>	

I will take a photo of what you did in the activities and photocopy any drawings you do.



I will visit you one last time to give you your photos to keep.



I will record what you say on a digital voice recorder.

I will keep a photo of what you made when we talked.






If you did not want me to keep a photo, that's OK.

I will write down what you said on my computer.

I will keep what you tell me very safe.



<p>I will write down what you say, but I won't write your name or your school down.</p> <p>I will keep what you say to me private.</p>	
<p>If I was worried you or someone else might get hurt, I would need to tell someone.</p>	
<p>If you were happy with it, I will tell other people what I learned about playtime from you.</p> <p>I won't tell anyone it was you that I talked to about it.</p>	
<p>If you were happy with it, I will put what you said in a magazine for other people to read.</p>	




**I wont tell anyone it was you that
I talked to about it.**



**I could put photo's of what you
made in a magazine too.**

**If you don't want me to, then
that's ok.**





<p>If you talk to me, but then don't want me to write what we talked about, that's OK.</p> <p>You can tell me you change your mind one week after we talked, but not after that.</p>	
<p>I will keep what you said safe on a computer for 20 years, and I won't write your name down.</p> <p>I won't let anyone else look at what you said unless they say what they want to look at it for.</p>	
<p>If you don't want to help me learn about your playtime, that's OK.</p> <p>You can tell me what you decide now, or you can tell your teacher later. If you change your mind, tell your teacher tomorrow, that's OK.</p>	
	<p>There might be lots of children who want to talk to me about playtime.</p>



**I will let you know very soon if you have
been chosen.**

Appendix 6: Visual consent form for potential participants.



	Yes 	No 
I know that Pete is finding out about what it is like for boys at playtime.		
It's OK for Pete to see what happens at playtime for me.		
I am happy to talk to Pete about my playtime.		
I know that I don't have to talk to Pete. I know I can tell Pete not to write about what we talked about up to 1 week after we talk.		
I know Pete will use a digital voice recorder, and he will write up what we said later to help him remember.		
I know Pete won't write down my name, or the name of my school.		

I know that Pete will keep what I say private. But I know he will have to tell someone if he thinks I'm not safe. I know he will have to tell someone if he thinks someone else is not safe.		
I know Pete will keep what I say on his locked computer.		
I know that someone else might want to read what I said one day. I know what I said will be kept on a safe computer for 20 years, and that no one can read what I said unless they explain why.		
I am happy for Pete to take a photo of what I build or draw when we talk.		
I am happy for Pete to tell other people what he learns about playtime. I know that he won't tell anyone it was me he talked to about it.		
I am happy for Pete to write what he learns about playtime in a magazine for other people. I know that he won't write down my name or tell anyone it was me he talked to.		
I am happy for Pete to put photo's of what I drew or made when we talked in a magazine for other people to look at. I know that he won't write down my name or tell anyone it was me that drew or built them.		
I know I can tell my teacher if I change my mind about it.		

Pupil consent form

Please read the sentences below, and tick yes or no in the box, and sign the back of this form.


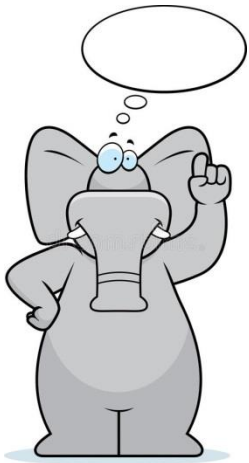


I(Name) am happy to help Pete learn about what happens at playtime for me.

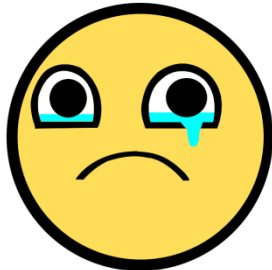
.....Date


Parent/carers name.....

School.....

Appendix 7: Topic guide

<p>Tell me about your favourite thing to do at break times.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do you do/does anyone else join you/how do you feel doing this/can you tell me more about that? 	
<p>Can you remember what happened yesterday at playtime?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What was that like/what did you do/how did you feel/what might you have said/what did someone else do/say? 	
<p>What could happen tomorrow at playtime?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What might you do/ what might the other children do or say/ what might the teachers do or say/how might you feel? 	
<p>Imagine the best school playground in the world</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What would it be like/who would be there/what would they be doing or saying/would you be doing or saying/would there be any special toys or games/ what would be 	

different about this playground to yours?	
<p>Imagine the worst school playground in the world</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What would it be like/what don't you like about this playground/what would you feel when on this playground/what would you be doing or saying/ what would other people be doing or saying/ what would be different about this playground to yours? 	
<p>Tell me about the best playtime you ever had.</p> <p>Are there any things you like about playtime?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> what was that like/ then what happened/what did they do or say/ what did you do or say/ how did you feel/ what do you wish would happen more? 	
<p>Tell me about the worst playtime you ever had</p> <p>Are there any things you don't like?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> what was that like/ then what happened/what did they do or say/ what did you do or say/ how did you feel/ what do you wish had happened? 	
<p>Are there any special people for you at playtime?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do they do or say/ do you talk or play with them/ what do they do that you like/ what could they do more/ what makes them special to you? 	

	
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Appendix 8: Class information sheet.



Information letter regarding a research project in your child's school

My name is Peter Dunning, and I am doing my currently in my second year of training on the Doctorate qualification for Educational Psychology at Bristol University. As part of my studies I am researching the experiences of some primary school children at playtime

Your child is not the focus of this study, therefore I will not be observing their play in particular. However, your child may play with a child who is part of the research.

During my observations of the play of the children, I will be making brief notes about the activities of the children, who and what they choose to play with, and how they communicate in the playground.

The notes will be written up into a longer document for my studies. This will not contain any identifying details about the school, or any of the children that I have observed.

If you would prefer that I do not make notes about anything related to your child, please sign and return this form. Thank you. I will then know not to include anything related to your child in the notes. This will mean that anything they do/say which I observe will not be written down or included in my study.

I **DO NOT** wish for any information regarding my child to be used in the proposed research.

Name of parent.....

Name of your child.....

Name of School.....

Signed.....

Date.....

Kind regards,
Peter Dunning

Appendix 9: Parent consent form.



Consent form

Title of Project: *Exploring the experiences of boys with autism during playtime in primary schools.*

Name of Researcher: Peter Dunning

Please write your
initial in all boxes

1. I agree that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I understand the study is exploring the experiences of playtime for boys with a diagnosis of autism. I have been able to think about the information, ask questions and have had these answered. ☐

2. I understand that my child does not have to take part in the study, and that they can be removed from the study at any time up to one week after the interview. If this happens my child's information will be removed from the study, and anything that recorded about them will be destroyed. I understand that I do not have to give a reason for removing my child from the study. ☐

3. I understand that my child will be observed three times at playtime while at school, and that notes will be made about what they do, and who they interact with. ☐
4. I understand that my child will be asked to talk about what happens during playtime, and that the conversation will last up to 1 hour in total. ☐
5. I understand that any work my child creates when they talk with the researcher will be recorded though photograph or photocopied. I agree to the researcher using this in the write up of the study. ☐
6. I understand that anything my child says will be anonymised, meaning no one will know that details in the study are about my child. I understand the researcher will change the names of my child, the school, and any other names or details to ensure this. ☐
7. I understand the information about my child will be kept on a secure database at the University of Bristol for 20 years. I understand no one will be able to access this information unless they give a good reason for looking at it. I understand that this information would also be anonymised. ☐
8. I agree to my child being recorded using a digital voice recorder when they speak with the researcher. ☐
9. I understand that the research will only go ahead if my child is happy to take part. ☐
10. I understand that agreeing to the research will not ensure my child taking part. I understand that the researcher will contact me one week after they speak with my child, to tell me if my child is part of the study. ☐

11. I agree for my child to take part in the above study.

☐

Please turn over and sign the back of this form

Name of parent.....

Name of child.....

Name of School.....

Signature.....

Date.....

Thank you

Appendix 10: Evidence of literature review.

Database	Search terms	Number of findings	Refinement	Relevant found/duplication
PsycINFO	1. ASC or ASD or AS or Autis* or Asperg* or Asperger's Syndrome	125302	combine	
	2. Play or playtime or play time or recess or freeplay or free play or unstructured time or playground or outdoor play or outdoor time	5041	combine	
	3. School or middle school or primary school	395657	combine	
	Experience or lived experience or phenomenology or interpretive or IPA	395164	Combine	
	Combined 1,2,3, and 4	9	-Title -Not an intervention study -primary school only	1 relevant,

	autis* or ASD or ASC or AS or Asperger syndrome and recess or play time or playtime AND school	14	-Title -Not intervention study -Primary school only	2 relevant,
--	---	----	---	-------------

	ASC or ASD or AS or Autis* or Asperg* or Asperger's Syndrome AND playground	139	-title screened -not intervention -primary school -written in English	10 relevant, inc 1 book. <i>2x were duplicates</i> 8 relevant without duplicates, inc 1 book chapter. Full paper read- 1 intervention study = 7 relevant
	Autis* and playtime and experience	0		
	ASC or ASD or AS or Autis* or Asperg* AND outdoor play	5	-title screened	0 relevant
	Autis* and school and experience	20	-title screened	1 relevant
Web of Science	ASC or ASD or AS or Autis* or Asperg* or Asperger's Syndrome And playtime or play time or playground or recess or freeplay or unstructured play	190,991		
	ASC or ASD or AS or Autis* or Asperg* or Asperger's Syndrome And playtime or play time or	187,260		

	playground or recess or freeplay or unstructured play and primary school			
	Autis* AND playtime AND primary school	0		
	Autis* AND play time AND primary school	17	Title	1 relevant
	Autis* AND playtime AND school	79	-Dated after 2003 -not intervention -title screened	2 relevant 1x were duplicate 1 relevant without duplicate.
	Autis* or ASC or ASD and playground or outdoor play	82,463		
	Asc and recess	64	Not intervention Not before 2003 (accept Oches et al 2001) Title abstract	11 relevant 7 duplicates 3 relevant without duplicate
	Asc or ASD and playtime	10,382		
	Asc and primary school and experience	98	Title abstract	2 relevant 2 duplicates 0 without duplicates
	ASD and playground	24	Title Abstract Not intervention	6 relevant 6 duplicates 0 without duplicates

	ASD and outdoor play	3	title	0 relevant
	ASD and recess	31	Title Abstract Not intervention	5 relevant 5 duplicates 0 without duplicates
	ASC and recess	1		0
	ASD and unstructured play	10		0 relevant
	Autis* and unstructured play	26	Title Not intervention	0 relevant
	Autis* and freeplay	0		
	Autis* and playtime AND elementary school	9	Title Not intervention	0
Educational Abstracts	Autis* OR ASC OR ASD OR AS AND playtime	5783		
	Autis* OR AS AND playground	5667		
	Autis* and playtime	4	title	0 relevant
	Autis* and playground	15	Title Not intervention	5 relevant 5 duplicates 0 without duplicate
	Autis* AND recess	12	Title Abstract Not intervention	3 relevant 2 duplicated 1 without duplicate
		0		

	Autis* AND freeplay AND schools			
	Autis* AND experience AND primary school	30	Title Abstract Not intervention	2 relevant 2 duplicates 0 without duplicates
	Autis* AND outdoor play	0		
	Autis* AND freeplay	0		
British Education Index	Autis* OR ASC OR ASD AND playtime	2516		
	Autis* AND playtime	0		
	Autis* AND freeplay	0		
	ASD AND playtime	0		
	Autis* And recess	6	Title Abstract Not intervention Not special schools	4 relevant 3 duplicate And one specialist 1 without duplicate Full paper read – 0 relevant as not mainstream
	Autis* and outdoor play	0		

Hand search strategies:

Alongside these databases, I used Google Scholar and searched for the same terms as above in Educational Psychology in Practice. I also used Snowballing, by searching the reference lists of studies generated from the review. Grey literature was included in the literature review. Oches et al (2001) was found through the review in several databases and was included despite being beyond the date specified due to its topic relevance.

Appendix 11: Example of coding/themes from Alex's interview transcript

Early themes		Initial coding
<p>Peers an important factor</p> <p>Function of playtime – being with others/exploring new places</p> <p>Factors that support – being in charge of the group</p> <p>Peers an important factor</p>	<p>R: Erm, this one is about, if there is anyone special to you at playtime? People who are important to you at playtime.</p> <p>A: Jasper, Sam, Peter, and Ryan Alfie and Martin. Did I say Ryan?</p> <p>R: Yep you said Ryan. What makes them so special at playtime?</p> <p>A: Coz they all usually follow me. They work with me and I work with them and we try to explore new places.</p> <p>R: And what's it like for you that they do that?</p> <p>A: I feel (...) I feel like I'm in charge but I'm not really. But I feel like I am.</p> <p>R: How come?</p> <p>A: I don't really know.</p> <p>R: So what do they do that you like?</p> <p>A: Well if I'm it they won't usually go after me.</p> <p>R: Oh they wont go after you? Do you prefer that?</p> <p>A: Yeah.</p> <p>R: Hmm. What could they do more of that would make it even better?</p> <p>A: I don't know.</p> <p>R: OK, and is there anyone else that's special at playtime?</p> <p>A: No,</p>	<p>Peers are special/important at playtime</p> <p>They follow me</p> <p>Working/doing things together with a group of peers</p> <p>They explore new places at playtime</p> <p>Feels like he's in charge of the group</p> <p>Likes that peers wont go after him during tag</p>

R: OK, and what about the adults at playtime, what could they do more of? Or what could they do less of? [Grab your reader's attention with a great quote

from the document or use this space to emphasize a key point. To place this text box anywhere on the page, just drag it.]

A: Less watching (comically glares at TA)

R: less watching (laughs)

TA: (laughs)

R: So less watching why would that be better?

A: I don't know I would just prefer it if there was less watching.

R: OK (...) how would you feel if there was less watching?

A: I would feel a bit better coz I don't know what they're watching me for, and I don't know why they're watching me (...) and its weird its like they're stalking me or something.

R: Do you, who do you mean?

A: [points to TA]

R: I wondered if you meant me today coz I was following you around as well wasn't I.

A: Yeah. But that was for something I know (...) and I have no idea why you're watching me [directed to TA].

TA: Would you like me to explain sometime?

A: Yes

TA: OK.

A: Coz you're a stalker.

TA: (smiles) nothing that boring. I'll explain to you later.

R: Maybe you could talk about that later, and then you'd know why you're being watched (...) If you had to guess why you might be being watched at playtime what you guess?

Only peers special/important at playtime

Feels watched by TA at playtime

Would prefer being watched by TA less at playtime/ possibly wanting privacy from TA

I don't know why they're watching me

Feels 'stalked'

Emphasis on being informed about why he is being watched.

Wants to TA to explain why he watches him.

Challenges/
Factors that support

Factors that support –
having his wish for privacy met

Challenges

being informed important

Challenges

A: I would guess they trying to see what I'm doing, and look after me.

R: Yeah.

Feels stalked

Aware the TA is probably trying to 'look after'/ help him by watching

Appendix 12: Elaborated fieldnotes and coding on Alex

Example of coding/themes from observing Alex at morning playtime (including onsite interpretations prior to coding and theme generation).

Early themes	Elaborated Fieldnotes Running Commentary	Onsite interpretations	Initial coding
Seeking support	Alex is on the playground playing tag by a nearby large wooden ship while eating an apple. The playground is vast, including a large field, and smaller field by the school building, and a climbing area with an attached trim trial. It is a hot and sunny day. Alex's one to one TA is standing close by the boys watching their play.		Playing with others TA close by watching Alex play
Being part of a group	Alex and four boys stand together doing 'tip tag toe' to decide who will be it in their game of chase. Another boy is chosen, and Alex quickly asks his TA if it is OK to throw his apple core in the hedges. His TA agrees to this, and Alex throws his apple away, before running and shouting 'catch me!' to the boy who is it. Together the three boys run and scream as the forth boy chases them. Alex then runs back to the ship with the other boys and they all climb onto it. Alex's TA remains at a distance watching. Alex walks along a 'plank' that juts out from the ship. He stands on the end of the plank, and two boys stand close by on the ship. One boy points to something across the playground, and Alex looks at this with them. They are looking for the fourth boy who is approaching now to catch them.	Seeking guidance from TA over if its ok to throw apple in hedge Same group of boys still. TA appears distracted from watching Alex	Seeking TA guidance playing with the same group of boys following his peers within the group sometimes watched by TA sometimes not
Being part of a group an important factor	'He's down there' says one of the boys. 'Yeah get him' says another, and they run towards him. Alex copies this and runs. He smashes into a girl as he runs 'whoops!' he says and carries on running. She appears fine and continues walking in the other direction. The boys congregate under a tree. Alex stands next to them, stamps his feet and swings his arms. They begin a game of tag, but they are playing directly on the football pitch without realising. Alex stands and watches the others running.	Appears to want to stay involved with the group Says 'whoops' possibly to show it was an accident Two games within the same space, conflict?	coping his peers and staying involved with this groups play has the awareness to indicate it was an accident Two games occurring in the same space Observing his peers play briefly
Social skills			

Appendix 13: Example of codes/themes from Noah's interview transcript.

Early themes		Initial coding
	<p>I: So this one now is thinking about the best playtime that you've ever had.</p> <p>N: Oh my goodness [...] I'm gunna need a long think.</p> <p>I: hmm, you have a good think.</p> <p>N: Erm [...]</p> <p>I: Can you remember when it was can you remember what you were doing?</p> <p>N: I've had lots of good playtimes at this school.</p> <p>I: Can you tell me about one of those then?</p> <p>N: I know I can [laughs] I only joined this school last year, and since then I've had a lot of good playtimes.</p> <p>I: Right, can you me an example of a good one?</p> <p>N: Errrrrm [...]</p> <p>I: When you walk out of your classroom Noah, and its playtimes whats the first thing that you notice that-</p> <p>N: -well we don't walk out of our classroom we sometimes just walk out of our classroom and sometimes the other door.</p> <p>I: Well say if you walked out of the classroom, what's the first thing you'd notice that would make you realise it was gunna be a good playtime?</p> <p>N: Not many people on the trim trial. Sometimes on the trim trail, on that wobbly bit, sometimes there's lot of people on it, did you spot that?</p> <p>I: I did, yeah.</p> <p>N: Normally when people aren't on there it normally makes me think erm that's gunna be a good playtime coz I go up and down the trim trail without missing the wobbling thing. Coz some people do like some people sit on the wobbling thing and try and see whos the last one on there. Like wobbling forwards and back and then when everyone falls off and they're the last one.</p>	
Factors that support- able to play with trim trail without others		<p>Has had lots of good playtimes/playtimes are often good</p> <p>Had lots of good playtimes at this school since he joined</p>
external factors like trim trail important		<p>Literal interpretation of 'walking out of your classroom' taken</p> <p>Trim trial being empty makes a good playtime</p> <p>Can be lots of people on the trim trail</p> <p>Peers get in the way of using the entire trim trail</p> <p>Other children sit on the trim trail/use it differently/play in</p>

Factors that support – able to use trim trail in his own way

Challenges/ Factors that support – doesn't get to use trim trail as he would like that often

Factors that support – interacting with adults

Function of playtime – chance to calm down after maths

Function of playtime –

I: Hmm, and is that something you would do with them?

N: No

I: How come?

N: Coz, it's a bit silly really coz you've to move it really hard, so it can hurt your back. So I would probably not do that. And when no ones on there, I'm like 'YES!'

I: [laughs]

N: [laughs]

I: Because you get to?

N: Erm, go up and down the trim trail without can off at the wobbly thing. Coz I've only been on the wobbly thing four times.

I: Ok, erm, anything else that would help you know that it was the best playtime?

N: Erm, [...]

I: That the main thing the trim trail? Anything the adults would be doing to make you know it was going to be a good playtime?

N: Well I normally have a good playtime when I get to, like I normally talk to Miss Adams, coz like last year every single time she was out she always came and stroked my teddy. But now he's [the teddy] is not allowed out at playtime, but I still go and talk to Miss Adams at playtimes.

I: Ok, so you like that, erm, what makes it good, talking to the adults at playtime?

N: Well, like at break time its always a good thing, because [whispers] *maths is not my favourite lesson.*

I: OK [laughs]

N: [laughs] So its good thing to calm down after maths. Coz like in maths I just sometimes, I get a bit stressed, and then when I get to playtime, like with the heat at the moment, I'm just getting a bit too stressed in maths, and when I'm outside I'm like 'finally I'm outside and not in that stupid maths class' [laughs]

Noah wouldn't use the trim trail in that way/ it can hurt your back/its silly

Glad when the trim trail is empty

Would like to use the trim trail without peers on more often

Talking to Miss Adams can make it a good playtime

Miss Adams approached Noah about his teddy, came repeatedly, now they talk at playtimes in general

'Break time its always a good thing'

Playtimes are a preferred part of the school day – compared to maths

Playtime a chance to calm down after maths

Playtime a chance to be outside

Appendix 14: Elaborated field notes and coding on Noah

Example of codes/themes from observing Noah at lunchtime (including onsite interpretations prior to coding and theme generation).

Early themes	Elaborated Fieldnotes Running Commentary	Onsite interpretations	Initial coding
social skills an important factor	Noah leaves his lunchbox and begins climbing the trim trail. The other children put their lunch box away, and a teacher collects Noah's one.	Playing by himself.	Plays on trim trail by himself
	Noah is playing near a group of girls who are sitting on some tires which are part of the trim trail. Noah jumps from tyre to tyre, making a different funny pose on each one as he lands on it.	Playing near to others by himself.	Plays near other children
	The nearby girls notice this, and laugh and smile at him.	Continues the interaction.	Has social skills to interact despite sometimes choosing to play alone
Moving in and out of social interactions	Noah is jumping from tyre to tyre on the trim trail and making a different pose and funny face each time he lands.		
	A nearby girl is watching Noah, smiling at him and laughing each time he lands.		Leaves the interaction with the girls to play alone again
	Noah starts looking at the girl each time he lands and giggling with her.		Talks to adult
Reflection time	He wanders away now, balancing on each new tyre, before leaving the trim trail.	Talking through what he's doing	Moving in and out of different social interactions
	Noah talks to an adult briefly (out of range to hear).		Talking through what he's doing – helps him?
	Noah walks into the field, and talks to himself as he plays. 'I'm going over here, and then I'll go to the playground' apparently to himself.		
Challenges – unsure what to do	He jumps on a climbing frame saying 'hop de do daaa!' as he walks along a wobbling wooden plank. Noah pulls himself up on the high post which supports this plank, and sits on it. He sits for a moment looking out at the playground.	Time to reflect on what's happening.	Reflecting on what's happening outside or something else possibly
	He calls for a nearby boy, but they don't respond.	Tries to talk to boy	Tries to talk with boy
	'What am I going to do?' he says to himself, and he wanders towards the	Possibly unsure what to do	Possibly unsure what to do

	field again. He looks back at me briefly.	Aware I'm watching	
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Appendix 15: Summaries of findings for individual participants.

The following table highlights the summaries for each participant, and highlights where commonalities existed. These are either labelled as: YES, to indicate where there was a clear indication of the summary within the participants interview and/or observation data; and left blank where the summary did not appear related to that participants data.

Subtheme/summary	Participant name					
	Noah	Logan	Sam	Alex	Liam	Morgan
The function of playtime	yes				yes	yes
<i>Moving in and out of social engagement</i>	yes		yes		yes	
<i>Difficulties</i>	yes		yes		yes	yes
<i>Isolation</i>		yes				
<i>Where does playtime begin or end?</i>		yes				
<i>The potential for being hurt by peers</i>	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes
<i>Enjoying being part of a group</i>				yes		
<i>Assertiveness in play</i>				yes		
<i>Seeking and resisting support</i>	yes			yes		
<i>'I get so annoyed'</i>			yes		yes	
<i>Brief interactions and solitary play</i>	yes	yes	yes			
<i>Skilled social operator</i>						yes
<i>Rough and tumble play</i>					yes	yes
<i>Altercations</i>			yes		yes	yes

<i>Processing time</i>	yes				yes	
<i>Interacting through structured games</i>					yes	yes
<i>'A bit of a war ground'</i>			yes		yes	

Appendix 16: Summary of themes and subthemes

Table summary of theme/subtheme with examples from interview and observation extracts.

Theme	Subtheme	Extract example
The function playtime can serve	Processing time	<i>So that's what I did yesterday I sat on the wall trying to learn what the colours are'.</i> Noah
		<i>I think about what I'm gunna do on the week.</i> Liam
	A time to be active	<i>[...] I mostly just run around and tha' [...] be active [...] coz like, we can't do that in lessons</i> Morgan
	A time to have fun	<i>Sometimes I get so bored in Maths I get hungry. [...] so it's good to go outside and have fun again</i> Noah
	A time to socialise with others	<i>We've just come back from, erm, two days holiday [the weekend] so we'll be happy, chatting and playing with each other and all tha'</i> Morgan
The challenges playtime can bring	Difficulties finding games	<i>Like yesterday erm he, I got a bit stuck of what to try to do. [...] trying to find games.</i> Noah
	Feeling watched by adults	<i>I would just prefer it if there was less watching.[...] I would feel a bit better cus I don't know what they're watching me for, and I don't know why they're watching me (...) and its weird it's like they're stalking me or something.</i> Alex
	Being hurt, teased or called names by peers	<i>Logan: Wait is this one trying to throw a ball at somebody? Researcher: Is he? Is he throwing it at him or to him? Logan: At him.</i> Logan
		<i>Two boys pass the bat back and forth to each other not letting Sam</i>

		<p><i>have it, and laughing and saying 'you can't get it'.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Observing Sam</i></p>
		<p><i>I was trying to play a game and then he shoved me.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Morgan</i></p>
	'A bit overwhelming'	<p><i>[...] it was a bit overwhelming coz I had to get used to, because obviously there was year 6 and the infant school, and that was a bit overwhelming coz there was, like my brain, it cannot really cope.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Noah</i></p>
	Being isolated	<p><i>I'd just ride [my bike] on my own and run around in circles.</i></p> <p><i>I no go out mostly.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Logan</i></p>
Factors which support a good playtime experience	External factors (physical context of the playground/rules)	<p><i>Noah stands on the trim trail and hops from one wooden post to the next. There are several groups of children playing nearby. Noah walks past them without any interaction. This involves at one point navigating around a girl to get to the next part of the trail, without comment.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Observing Noah</i></p>
		<p><i>[The best playtime in the world would be] on a massive playground that's bigger than Japan.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Alex</i></p>
		<p><i>Sam says "its not their turn!" Another boy approaches to take a bat and again Sam instructs them to leave as it is Year 5's day to use the items from the trolley. [...] He yells "GGGGRRRR! IT'S YEAR 5's DAY!"</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Observing Sam</i></p>
	Individual factors (social skills/ coping skills)	<p><i>[...] I go to Alex and he's got his Frisbee and I ask 'oh can I play?' and he sez 'sure' and then, lunchtime, I have like a couple of go's and then I says 'oh can I play a</i></p>

		<p><i>bit of football' and they're like 'oh yeah sure sure sure'</i></p> <p>Morgan</p>
		<p><i>Logan approaches me and pushes his block into the side of my face apparently to show it to me.</i></p> <p>Observing Logan</p>
		<p><i>[...] they [peers] don't know how to control their emotions [...] Kick the floor if you need to kick something.</i></p> <p>Liam</p>
	Interpersonal factors (preferences for social relations with children and teachers being met/unmet)	<p><i>Fun, cus I get to bring in someone. I'm never alone in my playtime.</i></p> <p>Alex</p>
		<p><i>They [one to one teaching assistants] follow children [...] and I just found that uncomfortable.</i></p> <p>Noah</p>
		<p><i>Mrs Smith [one to one teaching assistant] there's one game I like to play with her, and that's shadows [...] this is my favourite day.</i></p> <p>Sam</p>
		<p>Mr Adams, he just like stands round and all the year 5 girls come to him and just chat to him. But I rarely do. [...] I chat to my friends.</p> <p>Morgan</p>

Appendix 17: Developing the 'model of best practice'.

Early thoughts

In order to develop the model of best practice, I began by noting what key considerations (based on my findings) would be important in supporting a boy with autism at playtime. It was clear that individual differences were present in my participant group, and that a range of potential functions for playtime may exist for any child. I also knew that there may be challenges which children may need support with. Yet I knew from the views of some participants, that careful consideration would be required to ensure that interventions that were given were actually perceived as helpful to the child. This led to me to further reflect on the tendency for some factors relevant to supporting boys with autism at playtime to interact with one another, and that changes in one area may impact on playtime experiences, and on the ongoing appropriateness of a given approach.

The fact that no universal approach to supporting boys with autism at playtime had emerged from the research, initially made the task of creating a model about their support a challenge. However, once I considered that it was through understanding what was unique about each of my participants, I realised their support could be provided by developing a clear picture of the individual.

Research question two guided the key aspects included in the model

When considering research question two, the key areas which would be required in order to effectively support a boy with autism at playtime appeared to be:

1. Consider the physical context
2. Define how rules will be managed
3. Know the child's social skills and coping strategies
4. Know the child's social interaction preferences
5. Be aware of a range of potential challenges
6. Include and inform the child

(These areas are discussed further in relation to research question two). How these six areas might then be explored within a model of best practice was then developed by first reflecting on several issues.

Structuring the model based on RQ2 key areas and other reflections

Formost was the fact that I realised once I had spoken to individual participants that there behaviours at playtime may have had other meanings than the ones I had initially assigned. This led me to wonder whether the first activity in developing an effective support plan might be to speak with the child themselves. This was also indicated by the range of information required in order to understand participants preferences, with social interaction preferences only sensible when speaking to the children.

Despite the importance of speaking with the child, I was aware that some of the information required to develop a support plan might best be gained through observing them. For instance, the child social skills, coping strategies, issues related to rules on the playground, as well as the existing range of play apparatus available all needed to be considered.

Developing the plan and enacting it were then necessary steps based on these first two. For these stages I reflected back on the experiences of some participants, who reported being unsure why a particular intervention had been chosen for them, and expressed dissatisfaction with this. I therefore chose to emphasise the importance of child voice at this stage. However, I was also aware that not all children would find full participation in decision making about their support comfortable. I therefore have indicated that the level of participation a child has in their support within the model be carefully considered.

Finally, when considering that some factors which support positive playtime experiences may interact with one another, I considered the aspects of a plan which might need further consideration at a review stage. Many of these factors related back to the original two stages of the model, and any change with these. This led me to view the model as a cyclical plan of supporting children through ongoing assessment and review. It was only once the model was created that the possibility of using the model in a schools existing 'assess, plan, do, review' cycle became clear.

I chose to emphasise two aspects of the research further in the model (indicated in the model by yellow boxes). These were: the importance for considering individual differences, which is likely to guide all aspects of the information gathering stages and being aware that playtime may serve a unique function for some children.

Appendix 18: Example of observation jottings

Notes

Observation 1: lunch

Running Conversations

- leaves lunchbox & plays on train track.
- nearby group of girls.
- girl notices & smiles - he looks at her each he lands
- jumps from tyre to tyre by himself.
- wanders on
- Talks to adult - invisible.
- walks over to the field 'in
- going ~~over~~ here now

Onsite interpretations

continues the interaction

Appendix 19: Excerpt from audio recordings made in advance of elaborated fieldnotes.

Ok, so Noah was outside and started climbing the, errr trim trial. He jumped along some tyres with some girls playing nearby. Erm, OK so then at one point he made a funny face each time he landed on a tyre and, a girl noticed him doing this and err, she smiled. He then started looking back at her each time he landed and making a funny face and they were laughing about it. Er, I guess I noticed that he seemed responsive to the children around him. [...] He then went to speak to a teaching assistant but I couldn't hear what they were saying. He walked away and said 'I'm going over here, and then I'll go to the playground' [...] but he seemed to just be saying that to himself. [...] Next he went back to the climbing frame and jumped along it saying 'hop de do daa!' and then sat down on part of it. [...] Erm, what else? [...] he called a boy over but they didn't respond to him, so then he wandered back to the field again and said 'what am I going to do?' [...] He didn't seem sure what to do with himself.